

EXPEDITIONS INNER AND OUTER

Voyage on Board the RV Heraclitus

Bali to Singapore, January 2000 – July 2001

Michel Lippitsch

Expedition Leader and, at times, Captain

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This is a work of memoir. It reflects the author's recollections of events, locales, and conversations from his own experience over time. Some names and identifying details may have been changed.

PREFACE

The RV Heraclitus was built in 1975 by volunteers of the Institute of Ecotechnics, working eighteen-hour days for eight months on a vacant lot in Oakland, California. She launched into San Francisco Bay at sunrise on March 22 of that year, flying a Panamanian flag — under maritime law, the crew liked to point out, they were technically floating in Panama, even as the tugboat pulled them out past Alcatraz. Her hull was ferrocement: cheap, strong, and, crucially for a crew with more ambition than money, patchable at sea with nothing more than sand, cement, and time. Her lines were drawn from the Chinese junk, chosen less for speed than for the particular stability a junk holds in heavy seas, and for what her builders called the possibility of a “slow boat” — a vessel that let her crew actually feel the organic rhythm of wind and current, rather than simply outrunning it.

Over the following four decades the Heraclitus — known, informally, around the world's ports as the Magic Black Ship — sailed more than 270,000 nautical

miles across every ocean but the Arctic, through twelve major expeditions and hundreds of crew from more than fifty countries. She spent two years working up the Amazon on an ethnobotanical expedition inspired by the botanist Richard Evans Schultes. She carried researchers into the Antarctic to study whales. And her collection of coral specimens along the Yucatan coast helped seed what would become the largest man-made coral reef ever built — inside Biosphere 2, the sealed ecological experiment in the Arizona desert built by many of the same people who had built the ship itself.

It was in service of that same coral reef work — by then organized under the Planetary Coral Reef Foundation, chartering the *Heraclitus* for a Southeast Asian reef-mapping expedition running from 1995 to 2001 — that this particular voyage took place. This book picks it up in Bali in January 2000, and follows the ship for the next eighteen months: through Manus and the Solomon Islands during a national coup, along the reef coast of Papua New Guinea, across the Philippine archipelago from Davao to Palawan to El Nido, into dry dock in Singapore, and on through the rivers of Sarawak, Borneo. The author served as the expedition's leader throughout, and, at various points when circumstances required it, as her captain.

What follows was written in real time, mostly late at night, in the log itself — part ship's record, part personal journal, part running argument with the author's own doubts. It has been lightly copyedited for readability, but its voice, its immediacy, and its rough edges have been left largely as they were written. Nothing has been cut for the sake of a better story, or to make the author look wiser, kinder, or more certain than he actually was on any given night. It was not composed with a reader in mind. It is offered now, essentially unchanged, an honest and unpolished glimpse of one mind at the time —

because the record itself seemed worth keeping, exactly as it was kept.

CAST OF THE VOYAGE

Crew rotated on and off the Heraclitus throughout this eighteen-month voyage; not everyone below sailed the whole way. What follows are the people who appear most often in these pages.

Original Crew, as recorded in Bali, January 2000

Michel — Expedition leader / Documentation / Financial controller / Synesthesia manager

Eibis — Captain / Dive captain / Safety / Rigging / Communication

Brad — First mate / Bosun

Rich — Second mate / Chief engineer

Reka — Third mate / Synesthesia manager / Petty cash

Qamar — Scientific coordinator / Electronics

Sylvia — Science / Medical officer

Alison — Steward / Librarian

Kirsten — Medicals / Synesthesia assistant

Ferdi — Radio officer / Electronics, computer

Daniel — Small-boat manager / Plumber

Maik — Woodwork

Brenda — Able-bodied seaman

Also Appearing Across the Voyage

Orla — Joined later in the voyage; became the author's partner and a central figure through the second half of the book

Riversong — Rich's partner for much of the voyage

Sam — Mate; frequently piloted and navigated the ship

Heather — Diver and crew member, later voyage

Steve — Crew member, small-boat and dive operations

Karen — Diver and scientific crew

Jesse — Crew member and musician

Dave — Crew member, later voyage

Claus — Temporary crew member, Singapore/Malaysia leg

Piers — Dive student and crew, Malaysia leg

Inge — Crew member, Malaysia leg

Aram — Crew member, later voyage; photography and lighting

Susie — Crew member, later voyage

Cara — Crew member, later voyage

Gaie — Co-founder, Planetary Coral Reef Foundation

Lazer — Chief Operating Officer, Planetary Coral Reef Foundation

Johnny — John Allen — inventor and thinker, co-founder of the Institute of Ecotechnics and Biosphere 2, and a driving force behind the Heraclitus herself

Bob — Contact and film professional, Singapore

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February - April 2000

Chapter Three

Gizo, Solomon Islands

April - May 2000

Chapter Four

Gizo → Rabaul, PNG (Solomons coup)

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Chapter Five

Rabaul, New Britain, PNG

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Chapter One

Expedition from Sea People to Space People

An Odyssey Around the Big Blue

Voyage from Bali to Papua New Guinea

January 15, 2000

The ship is ready, stocked up, systems checked, last phone call made, last bill paid.

Synesthesia resembles a garden, overflowing with fruits and vegetables. Stacks of bananas hang from the ceiling, coolers full of lettuce.

Our friends are here to send us off. It has been a wild millennium under the spell of theater. We planned to leave at noon, and here we are, on time, with enough time left for long hugs and kisses. We decorated the stern with ceremonial Balinese decorations to honor the magical spirits of the sea.

Petra gave books for Nemo's, our library, and two pictures of her kids, with whom I spent the day of Galungan — the family temple day — in a pool, playing like sea creatures. She said, "This is your family here in Bali." She will be part of PCRFBali, helping to set up one of our home bases to continue the waste recycling systems. But before all that, she is a friend. Jan spent our last dinner with us and was cooking breakfast in the morning.

He ran errands for people on their last expedition preparations. Jill, Ronny, and Bali — my three-year-old girlfriend here in Bali — were there with their magic touch. Bali has touched my heart.

Sam, Qamar, Claus, Xtine, Gaie, and Lazer are all with us, but will remain behind for this forty-four-day odyssey.

We are entering the world of magic — the magic of a planet ocean under the influence of the stars and planets.

11:00 — photo session on the stern: the crew, the officers, Jan filming, Lazer filming, Gaie running the show.

I dressed in a black and gold sarong, the same one I wore at most of the ceremonies I attended here on the island, in honor of it. We also brought two Tambuan figures with us, to keep the magic of our theater performance alive. Thanks to David, who brought them all the way back from the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea.

We will carry them all the way home.

It is a wonderful send-off by our friends — a new expedition, a new vision, a new crew, more new dreams. We leave without delay, without burden, without fear, save for a little seasickness. We are loaded with hugs and kisses full of love. Thank you. We toast you every Sunday, to our friends around the planet — we must never forget that they are the ones with us on this journey. What better first step than all this love.

As soon as we headed out, the crew got busy coiling the ropes, Eibis piloting us out of the harbor, while on the dock Qamar started our sea chanteys: "I have sailed across the ocean, I have roamed upon the sea, and this dreadful life I'm living is just the life for me." Hands wave goodbye to silhouettes that grow smaller and smaller. When we can no longer see their eyes, we wave with our whole bodies instead.

The crew is in high spirits, though quite a few show signs of seasickness. Priska, the eight-year-old daughter of Eibis and Reka, holds up bravely. She keeps vomiting

over the stern, but when asked how she feels, she simply answers, "I vomit, and then I have to drink a lot." Ferdi has a strong fever but holds on. Kristen's foot is healing without infection.

Leaving the world behind — no phone, no cars — suddenly all the priorities dictated by time and obligation disappear. No one is rushing off to the internet café, or worrying about who they have to meet. Just watching the sails, steering the ship, checking on our vegetables and fruit, some cleaning here and there. And eating the wind every day, spiced by the stars.

We decided to wait for sunset for our sea ceremony.

We all, in turn, carried the tray overflowing with flowers and offered our wishes: good winds and fair seas, plenty of encounters with whales and dolphins, honor to the cetacean nation, a prayer for the spirits and gods of the sea. We threw the flowers into the ocean, burned a few incense sticks, passed a beer around, and finally gave all the decorations and some Balinese cakes to the sea.

I sat on the edge of the bow, focusing on the pattern of the water. Two dolphins came for a quick visit at the bow. I slept there, brushed by the waves and the wind, with only the stars above — Orion in full display. Entranced by the sound of water, sliced by the bow.

January 16, 2000

Woke up at six a.m. I went to the command room to check our position on the chart. I love charts — not only because they give so much information at once, but for the physical sensation of touch, smell, and beauty. The ship is peaceful. Rich prepares breakfast in the galley. I get a nice hot cup of coffee and go back to the bow. How luxurious that is — meditating, enjoying the changing colors of the morning sky.

10:00 a.m. — we anchor in a bay on the south side of Lombok. The volcano in the background, and finally, clean water. Hull scraping — the ship needed a shave. Galley duty — you can't start an odyssey without a clean galley. A scrub for the deck, and the first lesson in cooking: how to bake good bread, not bricks but something light and crispy. One of the basics. Life at sea always teaches you the importance of the basics, starting with feeding your body.

The fishermen head out to sea for their night's work. I dove today to the bottom of the bay to try to recover a lost hull scraper. The mud is soft, with less than a foot of visibility. No luck — we'll have to make do with one. We can always make a new hull scraper.

Whales are constantly on my mind. An island policeman came by with a small crowd to check us out. "No problem," he said. "We just wanted to make sure you weren't Taiwanese fishermen stealing all our fish." A sperm whale had stranded on a nearby beach two months ago. I had just been reading, the night before, the beautiful story of Tia, an Indonesian island girl who spent her time beside a stranded whale, singing the sea song she learned from her ancestors, to ease its passage to the land of the dead. The policeman left with a few cigars — we'd all decided to stop smoking, but still had two packs left between us. More temptation to come, I'm sure.

I picked up the camera to shoot the landscape of the island. The volcano appeared behind the clouds while the local prahus headed out to sea.

Seven bells — dinner is near. Already the noise of cutlery heads toward the deck, natural voices carrying out to the stars. Our first meal together at sea.

Tomorrow it's time to get the fishing gear ready. Craving sushi.

*the dream of sea people,
living with the elements,
caress of the wind,
and all sails up,
singing the song of the rigging.
the smell of fresh bread in the oven,
and Orion high in the sky,
telling us where we are.*

Comments and observations night. A nice meal by Maik, Reka, and Priska. The theme involved "the Tambuan." Priska played a cannibal from Papua New Guinea, hungry for fresh meat, invoking the spirit of the Tambuan. Our expedition members came out of the hatch seasick and in bad shape. The cannibal girl exclaimed, "Oh no — rotten meat."

Trying to be more civilized is the order of the day. Eibis found fifteen tea bags in the thermos — no one had bothered to check it. Those small details, overlooked on land, become crucial at sea. She accepts no sloppy housekeeping for long.

Some ideas for filming: the Tambuan traveling the world, starting aboard the RV Heraclitus. Tambuan on the helm. Tambuan doing a deck check. Tambuan on watch. Maybe the Tambuan simply want to get back to where they came from.

Brought by David, they already carry a bit of history. David went deep into the Sepik River on the mainland of Papua New Guinea, smuggled them through Irian Jaya, got them lost at the airport, and by some miracle they made their way to Bali. They performed in the millennium play. As the performance was ending with the dance of the Tambuan, the music started and the magic came alive.

The Tambuan put us in a trance. We could never quite stop once people began to embody them. I played the

shaman who invoked them. Now two of them are on board, on their way back home.

Allison brought a full bag of pebbles, to continue her artistic practice aboard the RVH. Our captain raised a hand straight away, asking for a proposal — we haven't yet gone fully anarchic on matters of aesthetics.

Nemo's is a library again, and the scrubbing of the deck was a purification. Imagine the hundreds of feet that came aboard in Bali without the deck once being sprayed clean.

I, Michel, made the commitment to write the basic cookbook of the RV Heraclitus by the end of next week.

The first bread-making lesson was a huge success. We talked about filming the different loaves coming out of the oven from each baker. Brick bread will be highly reprimanded — carried around the ankle for a day.

A reaffirmation of the dolphin study: to record every sighting and behavior we can. Rich made a funny comment: "It's also the best chance to see Michel naked — tell him there are dolphins." I used to jump on deck, often unable to find anything to wear, or losing my sarong along the way.

Rich will give talks on engineering, starting during our one o'clock ship meeting — our daily gathering covering all seamanship matters.

I started to dream about our expedition: the search for the origins, past, present, and future, of human culture — the study of the sixth kingdom. We are sea people, in the noble sense of the term — people living at sea. How rejuvenating it is to be back at sea, which I know is the vast place I call home. Freedom again, I embrace you with my soul. We are a strange tribe, so different from one another, yet united — an ensemble traveling through a land of no nation. Hunter-gatherers of sea information, continuously reshaping our thoughts and

minds, experimenting to adjust to change, merging with the new without losing the past. We often forget, amid everyday shore life, the task we've set for ourselves — but it's included in the equation. One realizes the priorities as necessary steps to survival at sea. We go further than survival; we're trying to evolve. Guides are there along the way.

I know that dolphins show me a path. Animal totem, or synchronicity, or magic, or spirit — it is a guidance toward a direction. Priska on board is a key element in the future of our evolution, showing the way. The education of a child is vital to the continuation of the human species.

We love the sea, above and below. Water carries such a strong vibration that we can only recharge and balance ourselves through it — union, one step closer to the cetacean nation. We roam in their territory, and they welcome us. We are not seen as enemies or intruders — we start with respect.

We are also a studio on the sea, carrying a tradition of art: theater, painting, photography, poetry, dance, music, filming. The creative process, never forgotten, essential.

I have a special dream: the birth of an underwater baby, a water baby, born among dolphins and raised upon the sea. Experience is the reality — or the realities. I am embarked on a shaman's journey across the oceans.

I hope my guides will not let me down — or more precisely, that I won't go blind to them and stop seeing them altogether. It is so easy to become alienated. A whole side of society is dedicated to disconnecting us from who we are.

We are one with the earth and the universe. Man has often had the vanity to consider himself superior. There is no above or below, only evolutionary steps that are not

separate but united. We have to remember what got us here, and what will get us anywhere.

As Jan pointed out, to know where you are, you just have to look up, and then you know. It is that simple.

There are energy lines across the planet — special places with particular "energy." Man is very receptive once he opens his channels, and he's not the only one; many animals react and respond to these currents — attraction, repulsion, yin, yang, balance.

What you do has an effect on the whole. Insignificant creatures, you might say — just dust in the universe. It won't matter if I live or die, if I do this or that. Well, I am not so sure. Your actions, your thoughts, have impacts. Is it not time to be conscious? Countless schools, esoteric schools, have preached that the road is long and hard. Why?

I do not claim to be illuminated — far from it. But life, and what is around you, is enough to start with; that should be all you will ever need. It doesn't have to be painful. It shouldn't be painful.

To return to the sea — how natural is the vision and desire to live there. It keeps you awake, and it keeps you dreaming. The adventure of life at full speed — not a slave to that speed. The wind carries us through. We have so many resources to keep ourselves at a certain standard, but truly, I am convinced we could survive on fish if we needed to.

But we have a duty — to share our knowledge, and above all to be grateful for the life we are allowed to live. It isn't only "us" doing the work; we must be doing something right. We also do some things wrong, but that's part of the quest — to learn the way.

Almost eleven o'clock, the generator is still on, giving a boost to our freezer. Outside, hundreds of lights dot the

horizon — fishermen out in their prahus. The sky is clear, my mind is clear. I think of friends, stars, love.

Love is the primal energy — transformed, mutated, but always itself. Love is simply the name we give it.

Vibration. I love everyone on board. I might get edgy with certain personalities, but it's only surface stuff.

Old conditioning still colors part of my reactions.

Learn to act, not react. I am lucky — I am with people who I am sure will wake me up if I fall asleep.

*nature's way to teach,
observations of the patterns,
strategy to program the visions,
tuning to the beat of the earth,
fine energy and vibration grid,
creating moods and secret rituals,
on old tested ground,
on old tested methods,
create the new mythologies,
carrying out the evolutionary game,
the play of gods and deities,
the miracle of life.*

On the Biosphere 2 project:

Ultimately, Biosphere 2 did not fail in its mission — to understand what is happening to planet Earth, to mirror her bigger sister on a smaller scale. And there you have it: taken over by the power of money and transformed into a scientific Disneyland, a playground for students, missing the essence of the project.

The thinkers and hard-loving, dedicated people, with their dream of peace and dedication.

Understanding and exploration got ejected, nearly killed off mentally. But the essence always survives.

The ocean is dead, the desert almost there — cheap tricks to create the illusion that all is running well. But it is out of whack. No real maintenance. Biosphere 2 is nothing like a biosphere anymore.

It turned into a museum three years after its creation. It was a revolutionary enough project to immediately enter history. Now it's time to exploit it, to make some cash.

The planetary vision is lost. Faith, hope, and love sent away — the whole thing couldn't do anything but collapse.

The mind and founder erased from the books — falsification of history. What's new?

Erase the man from the picture, manipulate the story, fill the space with suits and ties, lose the dream, and here we go: a replication of planet Earth.

But the revolution will not be televised. If anything, the dreamers got smarter, and wiser. It is happening all over. Play your cards right — new civilizations are emerging to help pave the way. We are all in the same boat, whether we believe it or not, whether we want it or not.

THE EXPEDITION

*witness in a whirlpool of change, searching for
the vanishing sea cultures, and the creation of a
sea people's dream.*

*create the dance that will follow the beat of the
oceans.*

recondition,

restructure the path,

abandon to the elements,

become the wind,

the warmth of the sun,

the clouds, the scent of freedom,

become the plants,

*become the snake,
become the shark,
become the dolphin,
and finally,
learn to be human.*

As a theater ensemble, the Blue Planet Ensemble, we use the world as our playground and stage. We feed, obviously, on our experiences at sea, above and below.

*from the foam of the sea,
rose a child from our dreams,
he gave the ocean his soul,
to watch over the minds of lost seamen,
reborn, they incarnated the spirit of the dolphins,
and the spirit of the dolphins dreamt the birth of a
new man,
what is man dreaming of?*

January 17, 2000

The tribe of the Aquamaniacs.

We are heading toward sperm whale territory. The moon shines her light on our masts, and we will dream of magical encounters, or wish for one, with the biggest brain on the planet.

6 p.m. — no sperm whale, but we sighted a single bottlenose dolphin.

The great news is that we are sailing with today's wind. We're barely making a knot — snailing along, really — but the silence is welcome.

I went to visit the crow's nest with Jacques Brel, just to stay in touch with our origins a little.

The moon, already high, will be full on Friday. She stands proud in a gap of an otherwise overcast sky.

Bread-making continues.

Memories pour down:

So, we finally traded our yellow construction hats for bare chests and feet, put most of our tools away in the closets, and became sea people. We turned into sailors, aquanauts, dreamers, scientists, actors, adventurers, poets, ambassadors of the deep blue.

Magic transformations.

We swam with sperm whales, the largest brain on Earth.

We struggled with leaking heads, no storage space, and stray emotions.

We anchored in pristine waters in Sulawesi. Dove with sharks, schools of eagle rays, turtles, dolphins.

We barbecued fresh-caught fish.

We learned to anticipate the fury of the sea, working with the circumstances we were given.

We painted, chipped away at films full of web frames, built a wooden cabinet.

As always, we cooked, cleaned, raised sails, dropped anchor, raised anchor, dreamed at night, worked the days.

We met extraordinary people. We met some bastards too.

Our hopes soared with a pod of more than a hundred pilot whales.

We saw the sun rise and set many times.

We cried — the reefs bombed, overfished. We dove on tumbled coral, destroyed reef tops. No grouper, no sea cucumber, no sea anemones, no clams. Stripped bare.

We found paradise islands still untouched.

Time for memories, old and new friends.

We traveled like a spaceship, visiting new planets with
different missions —

new cultures, science studies, tales and myths.

We visited jungles, played with wild orangutans.

Had things stolen, had things given.

Talked an awful lot, seeded ideas.

Rode out a force-ten storm — slashed, bashed, shaken.

Hit by lightning three times, watched a waterspout pass
a meter away.

Watched a hawksbill turtle laying eggs in Lankayan.

Cooked a six-course menu for fifty people to help recover
a stolen outboard.

Sat on piers stargazing.

Had meetings, arguments, insights, deep conversations,
plenty of nonsense talk.

We spliced and whipped ropes, climbed the mast on reef
lookout.

Danced around a fire on a full moon, celebrating the
ship's birthday, and Michel's.

The ship lost her eyes, and got them back.

We all rode our emotional centers, played with life, and
always tried to remember what got us here.

And mainly, what got us here are the friends made along
the way.

*like lost lovers reunited
I kiss the ocean with my body.
caresses
the eyes are the gates to the beauty of creation
rouse my senses,
shake my soul,*

*freedom,
I scream freedom with all I have,
my heart, my feet, my hands, my hair, my nose,
my mind
rouse my senses,
explosion of colors, shapes, sounds.
dance, dance the water.
you out there,
the fishes and the dolphins and the corals and the
sponges and the rays,
rouse my senses
I am part of you,
as much as you are part of me,
moments, magic.
no future, no past.
rouse my senses.
cities of lights,
busy citizens of the ocean world,
different species but no nation,
caress my mind,
and with all your beauty,
rouse my senses.*

Return, in memory, to magical Bali:

People dressed in black walk alongside the road, balancing offerings on their heads. In a nearby field, smoke floats up to the heavens. Men, women, and children stare at a burning fire, inside which lies the body of one of their dead. It smells like burning flesh — not unpleasant at all.

Another group grinds the ashes of a previous cremation. It isn't a rich man's ceremony — the altar and shrine don't carry as much gold or fancy design. But the deceased are honored all the same. There's no money for a gamelan orchestra; instead, a cheap stereo blasts an old tape. I am welcomed, even with my camera in hand. I'm given a prime spot in front of the fire, smoke drifting through my hair. The fire is fed with a gas burner — we

have to remember it is the rainy season, with monsoon rain pouring down almost every day.

Odalan, the yearly temple ceremony. I am lucky — I am let through the gate to witness the prayers. The bells, rung by the Brahman priest, keep the tempo. There are many people to bless. First, empty-handed, hands joined and reaching for the sky; then, three more times, with a flower in the hands, and empty-handed again — always under the Brahman's bell. Instructions are given through a microphone and speakers. Then the priests come with the holy water: drink three times, then purify your head, and put grains of rice on your forehead and eat a few. The process repeats for the next group of people. Everyone participates — men, women, girls, and boys. Then come the long-awaited dances, and the Barong dance in the courtyard.

The King of the Sea gave an introduction to the crowd:

Three-quarters of the planet is covered with water, linking continents, separating worlds.

Small, isolated groups of humanity were scattered around these continents, inhabiting their own worlds, utterly unaware of each other's existence.

Through a process of invention and experiment, a few human beings gradually built and learned to operate rafts, dugout canoes, grass boats, and outrigger sailing canoes. They explored first the rivers and bays, then ventured offshore, until finally they stayed at sea for longer and longer periods. In their voluminous, ribbellied fishing boats, they could make the sea their home.

With the development of better and more capable ships, distances could be covered, continents and worlds could be linked, and a culture of sea people established itself.

In the tradition of the Chinese junks, stories and adventures were harvested and shared through theater.

The junks moved along the riverbanks, where spectators would sit on the sloping shores. A colorful cast of emperors, generals, mothers-in-law, concubines, magistrates, gods, spirits, and demons reenacted the stories of mankind.

January 18, 2000

We are sailing — a good twenty knots — the ship heeling over, and for quite a few people it is their first experience of sailing.

The watches run their daily routine.

Brad, the first mate, runs the twelve-to-four with Daniel and Brenda.

Rich, the second mate, runs the four-to-eight with Sylvia, Maik, and Kristen.

Reka, the third mate, runs the eight-to-twelve with Ferdi, Alison, and eight-year-old Priska.

We passed the island of Sumbawa during the night, and this morning, Komodo. It poured for most of the night. The wind died down around ten a.m., and we're motoring now.

To bring the new crew up to speed, we are giving presentations on sailing and ship terminology.

We are truly the school ship. But the faster we get operational, the further we'll be able to venture into new territory.

The horizon is a bluish gray, swells crashing over the bow. We got soaked, and loved it. Got entranced at the helm, pearls of water and rain running along the hatches. Thinking of the biosphere, and the concept of

the planet's water system. We are one — how much more obvious can it be.

I know the intellect, worshipped as it is, will always find a way to justify itself, regardless of the theory or situation. Union of body and mind is the answer.

We collect rainwater — a continuation of the purification of our home. Carpets washed, clothes, walls, floors. Nothing extraneous gets to stay at this point. It isn't just washing — we weed out as much as we can: old papers, rusty pieces, rotten rope, and so on.

Man, an accumulator of garbage, gets drowned by it. It is time for a clearer vision.

Transformation, mutation.

"Before you start cutting diamonds, you'd better practice with glass."

*Sea poets,
a seaman feeds and lives through the elements,
faces at sea reveal his degree of attention,
spoken clouds,
and the cast of light,
shaping, reshaping our illusory realities,
the wind plays the skin,
a cocoon, lazily telling you where you are,
nowhere and everywhere,
not in or out,
not in any projections,
but that ethereal certainty of reality
that sea people like to call home,
the dwelling place of their freedom,
and the freedom of the seaman lies in the form of
the universe.
melting pot of cultural dimensions,
intersecting at crossroads,
a network of networks,
constantly reshaping their structures,*

*emergence of a synergetic culture,
some will move up to the stars,
some into the sea,
but sharing, in common,
the essence of a life's kingdom.*

We are bubbles of water in our shells, colonizing the land. And here we are, at the source, on the ocean. Out of the ocean we rose, and into the ocean we shall be reborn.

Is that the origin of human culture?

January 20, 2000

Biological clockwork — I wake up every morning at six. But tonight the sea was calling more insistently. The wind started to pick up, twenty to twenty-five knots on our sails.

"Where's the wind from?"

"Six points — go ten degrees more to starboard."

Somehow the wind direction is perfect; it lets us head east.

We sighted a pod of melon-headed whales. The waves are huge, breaking in irregular patterns. The wind keeps shifting, and squalls loaded with rain keep hitting us, but spirits are high, riding the energy of the day, everyone focused. The moment only, nothing else matters — this is when the sea truly teaches.

My bunk took a beating — it's usually the last thing people put in order, and paradise becomes a trigger for chaos.

We lowered the mizzen sail and reefed the main and foresail. We spotted a school of dolphins surfing a huge wave, then caught two tuna — the first fish of the voyage. They became sushi and a nice curry.

A cargo ship came within three-tenths of a mile of us and played some kind of odd game. Pirates, maybe?

We're making good progress, with day-runs over a hundred miles, all under sail. Go, Heraclitus, go.

*stand still,
smile,
and everything unfolds,
get carried by the wind,
let the waves play your mind,
dance, dance,
keep on dancing the sea.*

A booby took up residence on the mizzen mast — he'd already dropped a present on the deck.

I climbed up to try to scare him off. Instead, he looked at me, opened his mouth a few times, and went back to sleep. I was inches from his face. He left early the next morning.

January 21, 2000

The sea calmed early in the morning. At noon, our day's run was 118 nautical miles, all under sail. A pod of spinner dolphins came by, but lost interest and moved on. We hove to for a clean-up and to fix our leaking stove. Lunch was cold food.

Rain poured like buckets, and we had fun scrubbing the deck.

Swim stop. Then disaster struck: Brad went down to start the main engine but forgot the raw-water intake. Fumes came pouring out of the engine room, and Rich was devastated — would the engine run again? We were heading, with the current, straight for Batu Tara, a volcano rising from the middle of the sea.

We could well have blown the engine, which would have meant the end of this expedition, at least for a while. So

we ran through our accident sequence and waited for the engine to cool down before trying it again.

To put the odds in our favor — not that I always believe it helps — I climbed to the top of the mast with incense and prayed to the gods.

Somehow I felt everything would be fine, and we did escape disaster. A good lesson learned.

We had planned a party but opted instead for a comments-and-observations night — more of the color of the day, and much needed.

The name of the game is to remain as conscious of your actions as possible.

Easier said than done — we are raised as automatons, programmed to push buttons without really knowing what they do.

It's a full moon tonight, and as usual I can't sleep. I painted two canvases, then finally went to sleep on the bow. The volcano is still in full view, and we are getting closer — fumes rising from the cone.

*like a huge sleeping dragon,
Batu Tara is barely asleep,
puffing smoke through her nostrils.
from the center of the earth,
she keeps a connection,
and nature works on me,
I am one with it.*

January 22, 2000

Woke up under a dark gray sky. Batu Tara still ahead of us.

Acting class with the Tambuan, the volcano, and fire spirits — Priska, the great goddess of fire, came alive. Just as we finished our skit, the wind and rain took over.

Strat decided to head for Karang Koka, an atoll near Wakatobi.

"Before you play with gimmicks, start by improving the basics."

Squalls are constant at this time, the skies casting indigo colors across the horizon.

The wind picks up within minutes, and constant attention is required on deck.

We had a break during dinner that allowed me to play entertainer, projecting slides on the mainsail, and playing tunes on the boombox. Then we watched our first week of footage.

Constant squalls attacked us again all through the night.

January 23, 2000

Sunday. We keep tacking, but the favorable wind has left us for now — we're unable to steer north. The weather is too uncertain to enter an atoll. At sea, no one can truly predict her next move.

Thoughts: Most island peoples of the past held to a tradition of cannibalism.

Human flesh was considered a delicacy, and most tribes were war-oriented. Even a peaceful tribe, living quietly in a garden of Eden, could be condemned by a more ferocious neighboring tribe to defend itself and raise an army of warriors.

Unfortunate, but peace is not always a matter of choice. It takes common agreement to end wars — though it may not be strictly necessary, is there a way around it?

So warfare became the trend among islanders. Superstitions grew up around it, creating conflict and power.

Eating a man is not, in itself, considered morally wrong — as one Solomon Islander put it, if an enemy is killed, why waste good meat? "You white men give it to the worms, or leave it to rot underground."

In the Solomons, the practice went further — prisoners were fattened for feasts.

The white man was considered a lesser choice, owing to his habits of tobacco smoking and strange diet.

My mind wandered on to other civilizations — the legend of the lost continent of Mu, birthplace of an advanced human race.

Atlantis is another; the legend continues that the people of Mu came to teach the Atlanteans. In the Bahamas, there are vestiges of sunken blocks, huge stones hinting at a vanished culture.

Traveling the world, encountering those ancient remains — wonders of human ingenuity, artfulness, and taste, like the pyramids, the temples of Angkor, the city of Machu Picchu, and so on — our Western technological advance couldn't replicate or build such wonders. The automation of the world around us is robotizing us. Man becomes disconnected from the elements. The "new" cyberculture, living in virtual reality, atrophies the senses and body, creating new chemistries and mutations of the mind. Good or bad is not the question — that a mutation is occurring is clear.

Evolution, and the potential of humanity, really begin with the individual. The quest for power has alienated us to the point of no return. We have to keep playing the game already in motion, and try to reverse the outcome that seems predictable.

Power creates and exploits addiction to enslave people, and man is so easily addicted. All the senses are exploited: taste, with sugar and chemicals, artificial flavoring; sight, with television, and so on.

Here at sea, our crew finds itself with a lot of free time on its hands. The initial reaction is disorientation. Programmed to stay mentally active, always under time-created pressure, with artificial needs like constant communication, the sudden change comes as a shock. Some people keep talking to fill the silence, others sleep, or read. But the real treasure is becoming part of the elements — this deep connection with the earth. Moods are easier to feel; subtle energies have room to be acknowledged.

The mind can easily imagine communication with other intelligences. At sea there is a closeness to the sky rarely felt on land — unobstructed, the heavens draw the mind of man.

Turtles are master celestial navigators, finding an exact location after roaming the sea for a year or more. Shamans probably made use of animal intelligence to navigate the sea, or the jungle.

The vibration of our non-organic technology is breaking the natural channels inside us — "polluted" might be the word. Our chemical makeup is changing; can we keep those channels alive, or is it already too late?

January 24, 2000

The wind shifted — we can steer north again.

Life is a mystery, and to keep the magic alive we need to listen to the elements, but also project our intention. The state of our minds is far more significant than we tend to credit. It's easier to keep to small talk; the thoughts live on by themselves.

I cooked dinner tonight. We haven't caught another fish since those two tuna — our lines got tangled from a lack of attention, really. We truly need to redefine our basics. Two thermoses broke today. Vigilance and respect for what we have; discipline to take care of our own

survival, and only then allow ourselves to fly off into dreams and visions.

During the evening's speeches it was clear that a lot of people were thinking of home, or of where they came from. And the sea — the great teacher — because she never lets you "sleep" for too long.

January 25, 2000

Squalls keep hitting us — headwind from the north. We are motoring toward Karang Koka.

The rain hits hard, a thousand needles on the skin, but since the mind doesn't fix on a single point, the "pain" turns into a mild trance state. The forces of the elements in full glory. Energized.

The atoll, two miles off now, is impenetrable — a squall is coming in. I climb to the top of the mast and enjoy the storm from up there. I feel like a shaman on a rite of passage. Suddenly the rain hits, and, like a wet bird, I ride the wind.

We enter the atoll under Brad's command — a fine maneuver, Eibis on the mast, Rich on the fixes and GPS, everyone working in sync. We anchor in 140 feet of water, deep blue. Eibis and I dive the anchor: a perfect sandy bottom, and it's dug in well. We know we'll sleep easier tonight. We come up slowly, enjoying the open space of "just the blue."

Priska, Brenda, Ferdi, Eibis, and I go for a snorkel, but a strong current carries us out toward the open sea and cuts our time short. The reef isn't very healthy — a lot of rubble, likely from bombing, and very few fish. I trailed behind the boat, playing at being a dolphin. Only once all my muscles were completely relaxed did I feel truly one with the sea.

Back on board, I noticed my breathing had instantly deepened — long, slow breaths, back to a "yogic" state.

Fantasy in full swing: during my two-to-three a.m. watch, I imagined a far-off island removed from our civilization, and began to invent a myth. Two tribes, one peaceful, the other fierce, lived on two separate islands.

The fierce people, having depleted their own resources, kept warring on the other. Not wanting his people to become warriors themselves, the peaceful chief invoked the spirit of the ocean for help. He had a vision: his son, Aku, was to train with dolphins and learn purity, so as to enter the magic cave where the god of the sea lived, and there be told the next step.

All the while, ceremonies were held to attract the spirits and keep them near. The spirit of the air was to serve as messenger for the tribe, monitoring the advance of the fierce tribe.

The goddess of waves was invoked to ward the enemies away. So the peaceful tribe carried on with its beautiful ceremonial rites, while their fierce opponents bred evil.

... In the end, Aku saves the princess, and converts the people of the other tribe to follow him on the path of peace.

January 26, 2000

The sea is flat calm — first time in days. We work out a schedule so everyone gets a dive in, and time to rest if needed.

A squall is coming in right now, with southerly winds — a dive is out. I hope everyone gets the signal in time. The wind picked up during lunch; we need to stay alert.

We can't dive in the afternoon — the swells are too high. But the team that got their dive in this morning came back happy.

I just discovered we still have the leak in the lab.

I went quickly — too quickly — to snorkel, breaking every safety procedure imaginable in an instant. Not good. But the ride was wild, with seabirds feeding all around and huge swells.

Went down to the edge of the drop-off: a huge barracuda, a Napoleon fish, and a big school of sweetlips.

A nice day.

January 27, 2000

Morning dive with Rich to test the underwater camera and new lights — hit by a thousand colors and shapes, the reef at its best. But the tenders up top get caught by a squall, while underneath we're playing with an eagle ray, a turtle. I filmed some close-ups of the reef; the system works fine, but is really only useful for close range.

The ride back is rough, huge swells pounding the bow.

The ship needs to be ready to depart tomorrow morning. The crew shapes her up; Eibis, Brad, and Sylvia get the last dive in to collect data, while Rich labors in the engine room to troubleshoot the generator.

He spends the whole night down there with a flask of coffee as his closest friend. He doesn't give up, and in the early hours of the morning finally claims victory after a twenty-hour marathon. His focus, and his ability to stay calm without freaking out, is impressive.

Bonus for the day: a Bajau boat comes by, and we trade sugar and coffee for fish. We end up with twenty kilos — mostly rainbow runner, but also a jewel, a fresh yellowfin tuna. We spend an hour with Eibis and Ferdi cleaning fish by kerosene lamp, the generator still out of order.

Sashimi, ceviche — we feast on raw fish. For dinner, baked fish, and we know that for the next few days we'll be indulging in sea protein. Feels like real sea people again. I couldn't face another piece of chicken.

The sky cleared, and for the first time in weeks the stars began to speak to us again — Orion, the whole Milky Way in full spectacle, the biggest stage, the night sky.

No wonder humanity has always looked up for its answers.

January 28, 2000

Breakfast, and a departure meeting. We review the emergency procedures, get familiar with the new engine-room protocol, and do a walk-through of the ship.

I get carried away with thoughts as we discuss disposing of one Tambuan figure in Papua New Guinea — I fantasize about a procession through a remote village, the figure becoming a totem, an anthropologist arriving twenty years later to speculate about a strange cult of sea people.

How can you really trust history?

The wind, from 290 degrees, lets us sail almost due north. The elements are with us. It feels right, it feels good.

I cooked fish soup and sushi for lunch, our little fish-dish festival.

January 29, 2000

One of those gray days where you feel like staying in bed. We ransacked the command room with Eibis and pulled some old paperwork out of a forgotten hole, part of our ongoing weeding-out process.

A melancholic mood too, thinking of Yvonne — missing her, wishing she were here. Going through old papers, I come across a design for a water-birth tank, some dolphin papers from Gaie, and the visions from my dreams: a sea culture of the future.

*we are all habit-forming creatures,
the way we stand, move, play, affects our way of
thinking,
different attitudes,
different experiences,
molding your body to fit the lifestyle,
I become water, I breathe the open sea,
wind in my mind,
stars in my dreams,
freedom, the ultimate utopia,
Homo creativus,
Homo delphinus,
Homo oceanus.*

Last night we had a good comments-and-observations night — I asked everyone to share three images from our stay in Karang Koka.

This is what Daniel came up with:

My dear diary,

>

I am very sorry I didn't write the last few days, but we were so busy. We were on, or in, an atoll called Karang Koka or something like that. An atoll is something like an island in the middle of the ocean — but without the island.

>

So we anchored in the middle, and everybody said the atoll had a big entrance, but I only saw water.

>

We did a lot of beautiful diving. I saw lots of funny fish, and even two sharks. The big one was very lazy, but the small one was very curious — it came very near, and even though there were four of us, it swam off. I was afraid, but I think it was too, because it left very quickly. Very exciting.

>

Once our funny captain wanted to show us how to catch a fish, with a fishing line trailing behind the speedboat. He acted like a real fisherman, with power and pride — just without success.

>

There are strong personalities on board. One just talks about diving, another about cutting his hair, another — a mean boy — always calls me "little curtain," and everyone laughs. I don't know why.

>

On our last night on that invisible island, I could see all the stars. I tried to count them, but at one point I fell asleep. So I hope to try again tomorrow.

>

Yours, Daniel

A creative mind, around here. The stop was indeed magical, full of images and experiences. Everyone got their fill, ready for the next leg.

January 30, 2000

A strange night, opening with a scene from **Blade Runner** — the one where the replicant saves Harrison Ford's life and lets the dove fly away as he dies.

Listening to music, I chant my love to the sea, and Yvonne is so present in my mind.

My back started to hurt, and by noon I could hardly move — I must have pinched a nerve.

A squall with thirty to thirty-five knots of wind hits us. It takes me more than a minute to get out of bed, just enough time to close two portholes, but I can't be of any help on deck. The ship is heeling hard, Eibis and Rich in control. The rest of the night becomes a personal battle with pain, riding my mind through it, or around it. How helpless a human being can be. Humanity, or clans at the start, had no choice but to cooperate — a wake-up call about what we usually take for granted.

I go through more water-birth papers, and read about the release of Joe and Rosie, two captive dolphins rehabilitated back to the wild. It's telling that once "domesticated," a creature needs reprogramming for freedom. I suppose that's what we're doing here at sea — deconditioning, for a chance at reprogramming.

The steering bilge gets clogged. Rich, Bradley, and Eibis start pulling what looks like guts out of the bilge — hoses, ropes, tarps, and more. Another dark corner of the ship demanding some light. Very much like a living organism.

Sunday dinner, with great speeches. A while ago, Reka gave me a massage and some Reiki — it didn't reduce the pain, but it felt very good.

All I can do is stay still and read. I fall into the twelve Olympians, especially Aphrodite and Dionysus, and recall my mythical affair in Crete — an organic experience of the Minoan civilization, the call of Aphrodite under the cult of Dionysus.

I lose myself in Egypt, in a book, *The Four Faces of Shiva*, about the temple of Angkor and the Khmer empire. So many civilizations have vanished without a

trace. Humanity is extraordinary — we started out as artist-shamans in caves, producing the most fantastical mythical explanations for our existence. What a desire. Always through the lens of poetry and art, where science alone cannot yet reach — just different languages of the mind.

January 31, 2000

Still crippled, sleep becomes the only escape, so I sleep a lot, waiting for the storm of pain to pass. The day is gray. Ferdi shaved his head, keeping Maik company. Rich gives us a talk on the bilge system.

A school of two to three hundred spinner dolphins passes by, three-meter-high jumps — a great sight. The sea is boiling with fish, but we don't catch any — even with our fanciest lures they simply won't bite. Maybe it's a curse, since we're passing Buru, an island notorious for its strong magic.

Restless, I decide to cook dinner in honor of our last eggs, with a crème caramel.

We hear dolphins just before the evening talk.

Ferdi played the didgeridoo to the stars.

February 1, 2000

Birds are everywhere, and fish jump all over the place — still, no one is interested in our hooks.

We do a man-overboard drill with everyone.

Man cannot, as far as his mind can think, travel faster than the speed of light. Tonight we're having a Tuesday on stars.

Jacopo's boat is named Andromeda. Andromeda upset the nymphs of the sea, and Neptune sent a whale to

devour her, but the whale couldn't catch her, so they chained her to a rock instead. Jacopo is chained to Miami, under the spell of his own Andromeda, upsetting his muse. Will he be free only once the whale finally devours her?

The Khmer civilization vanished after building one of the most extraordinary temple complexes on Earth. Why?

Somewhere in the universe is a small blue pearl of a planet we call home — us, the human kingdom, traveling on our own spaceship. Where to?

A heated discussion during our star night: why should humanity go to Mars? There's enough trouble on planet Earth to solve without wasting time and money colonizing a hostile planet, Daniel argued.

Brad gets characteristically emotional: "But I truly believe it's biologically what man needs to do."

I close the table, and the discussion continues after dinner. I go to the bow for a didgeridoo session and some bioluminescence-watching, thinking of Yvonne again, wondering if she ever contacted the Russian scientist who specializes in bioluminescence. From there my mind wanders to dolphins, to love, and on to galactic thoughts. I am too much in love with the Earth to entertain any Mars fantasies, though it makes for good conversation.

A cargo ship comes close to collision — it sits off our starboard side for a couple of hours, then suddenly changes course. A lucky miss.

I spend the night on the bow, under the stars.

February 2, 2000

A thousand-and-one-nights kind of waking. The moon a perfect half crescent over a dark blue sky, with just the right amount of cloud.

My back is better — at least I can move. I get lost watching the pattern of the waves.

Acting class, and a swim stop.

Still in love with the blue.

A squall-filled night, without stars. Another boat comes close. The wind is with us again.

Another twelve hundred miles to go. We're out of fresh vegetables — onions, garlic, pumpkin — and still the fish jump in front of our faces without biting our lures.

*mad,
mad for the world,
no wisdom,
no, no, no.
nothing there,
everything everywhere,
the play in the labyrinth of information,
the word transforms,
language grows,
and poetry will always rule.*

We brainstorm a name for this expedition. Words come at random: Pacific, Oceania, round the world, expedition, journey, odyssey. I look for a Polynesian god that might fit — Ronga, Ta'ahura, and the like.

An idea for a book title: *Oceanic Dialogues — Conversations with the Seas.*

*Tao hommoceanus, the way of the man of the
ocean,
inside,
outside,
only concepts,
everything connects,
most of the time we are reactors,
but when a conscious actor takes the stage,
he can guide his play,*

*there is no control
over reactions,
control is illusion.
guide and be,
be what you believe,
between the sky, the ocean, and you,
universe unite,
everything changes,
rules are concepts, and concepts are not realities.
under the stars,
certainty of truth,
your soul speaks,
the language beyond words.
space and time have come to try to rule us,
we are creating our own boundaries.
within the power of play, with mind and body,
and body and mind,
gifts from sea angels,
free to create the myth of our imagination,
creation,
discipline,
to survive.
as much a kid as a sage,
naive and full of insight,
we juggle the roads of the mind.
"come back to reality," I hear voices calling,
and in the depths of my soul,
I know they do not know.
is the road always lonely,
can the way of understanding move without man?
gods, are you still playing with me,
why do I think some gifts go beyond reason?
love is real,
intensity hard to bear,
the courage to love, to love,
beyond the judgment of cultures,
man-made grids of illusion,
can one know, and still be willing to play the
game?*

*under the spell of oceanic beauty,
and the love supreme of a woman,
the earth becomes my lover,
orgasmic, shining calls,
god of nature,
part of me, part of all,
I bow to your mysteries,
I might be laughed at,
creator of laughter,
but my love will reign supreme,
because it can only encompass all, and
everything.
in the eyes of a whale, I saw wisdom,
exchange of unspeakable truth,
where can I go with what I know,
where can I go with what I don't know?
my ignorance can be bliss,
in the realm of the dream warrior.
still hunter-gatherer,
information organically collected,
infinite,
I am nothing in everything.
song of a bird,
the flight of the albatross riding the winds of the
high seas,
visions of forgotten lands,
forgotten civilizations,
knowing the limitations,
riding them to the road of the unknown.
voyages,
inner and outer,
for the love of traveling,
necessities,
addictions,
illuminations,
a mind gone wild,
but with the harness of a form,
synergetically bound,
to the whole.*

*insanity of the truly sane,
the dreamers, past, present, and future.
silence of the void,
sheets of delicious, ecstatic hallucination,
no reality, only realities.
chemical transformation,
mutation,
simply the certainty of being alive,
within, the passion burns,
eternal fire, for a lifetime or for a day,
water-spirit mentality,
fluid, hydromania,
tribal aquatic thoughts,
the "ivresse" of grand follies,
like the civilization of a sea people,
roaming in the illusory freedom of its foundations,
doomed to fail or succeed,
an experiment for the eyes of the world.
enchanted playground of psychedelic mastery,
lush coral garden,
dolphins conspiring,
aquatic magic,
essence of the real.*

February 3, 2000

The highlight of the day is a pod of over a hundred spinner dolphins — only two came close to the ship. They were small, and almost black.

During the night some dolphins came for a visit; Reka, practicing reiki, was excited about her experience. I, meanwhile, had wild, wild dreams. A very special night.

A somewhat lazy, comfortable day, with a great swim stop — everyone went into a peaceful blue sea. I got my breath back, diving into the blue and not wanting to come up.

The call of the deep, suspended in a soup of plankton, simply being there, motionless, breathless — a vacuum. Then the body suddenly demands oxygen, and I've never been able to resist that demand, so I go back up — only to take in what I need, one deep fresh breath, and disappear once again into the belly of my mother.

A nice conversation with Daniel on the stern, under the spectacle of the changing sunset.

February 4, 2000

"Whales!" The best wake-up possible. From every side, fins slice the water — huge pilot whales cover the horizon on all sides. Everyone is on deck, like kids jumping around. We are sailing. A huge male comes close to the stern — my heart pounding, happy. And there they blow. For the next twenty minutes, sweet madness takes over. A pod of spinner dolphins races by at the bow, a few spins, a few jumps. Cetacean heaven. More whales surface to port, then to starboard. A wonderful gift from the sea.

The lab is calm and still — I get high up there. I cook lunch, and a swim stop follows.

Strat command in the early afternoon reviews our situation. Halfway through the fuel, halfway there, we're looking at possible stops to refuel and take on fresh food. Diesel in Indonesia costs half, if not less, of what it does in Papua New Guinea.

We're fifty miles from Selat Sagewin, our gateway to the Pacific — halfway to Manus Island, another eleven hundred miles to go. We plan to reach the entrance to the strait around eight a.m., to have ample time to cross during daylight.

A huge blow, ten meters from the ship, and a fin and a long, long body — a baleen whale, most likely a fin whale, judging by the shape of the fin. The blow stands

four meters tall. A shining moment, one of those that gets engraved in memory, where the instant becomes eternity.

The different reactions people have around whales are fascinating. Some just watch through the camera lens — I've moved past that obsession. Others chant about how beautiful it is. Others send out reiki, "feeling the connection." Others sing, some marvel in silence, others want to know the species and argue about it. But no one is left untouched. We call our home their territory — the world's ocean.

February 5, 2000

5:45 — we are at the gate to the Pacific, Selat Sagewin. Our entrance to another chapter. The sun rises directly ahead. A pod of six dolphins swims by.

The smell of the land takes hold of you — the whole landscape is covered in pristine forest, and the sea is calm.

The tide turns; we make less than two knots. Logs constantly float by, evidence of logging going on nearby. We pass through a lot of plastic trash, caught between currents.

But the scenery is grand — small villages dot the water's edge.

A few boats pass by without so much as a glance toward us — a change from the more outgoing Balinese we're used to.

We are truly entering new territory.

We exit the strait by 4:00 p.m. and prepare for a party. Priska and Alison paint their bodies with color, music plays, and, as the jewel in the crown, a pod of dolphins comes to ride the bow.

February 6, 2000

The ocean feels different — huge swells, rolling in from a long way off, would delight surfers once they met the shore.

A large group of spinners visits our bow, traveling west.

My mind turns to the elements — wave patterns, but especially the light. So much information in the light. Some insight into the art of navigation. How many true navigators — ocean navigators, that is — remain alive? It is truly an art. Stars, currents, reflections alone couldn't have been enough. How does a turtle know the exact position of a certain beach? How do birds know the location of their wintering grounds? Man must have hidden senses he can tap into. By simple observation alone, so much information can be drawn. Observation of the senses — you can smell land miles away. Bird flight directions, currents, fish caught or sighted — and why not dream of interspecies communication, like some sea shamans traveling with the minds of sea creatures? And the stars, and the moon — if one is sensitive enough, can their effects be felt and used for guidance? Their positions can certainly be used. Isn't it likely that, through centuries of observation, certain known weather patterns were forgotten, or kept secret? And old maps — can man not be trained to memorize maps and directions, to become a kind of human compass, a magnetically sensitive extra sense? To read humidity and decipher the secrets of the air?

And clouds — so much held in the clouds and their formations, a visualization of the movement of weather. Truly an art, and most probably the birthplace of real scientific minds, once creation myths were no longer enough.

Maybe all it took was faith, or desperation — cultures with enough knowledge but not enough resources,

setting out to sea, probably often without expecting to return. Or simply lost to the currents.

Many questions, with many possible answers.

We are the best instrument possible. We may have tools now, but do those tools simply kill off the older skills, replacing them outright? How many people have lost the art of celestial navigation since GPS? Who can still calculate quickly, now that we all use calculators?

We atrophy certain senses, certain knowledge or know-how, which frees up room for other functions. Evolution? Mutation?

Being at sea for a while, one is removed from the usual stimuli of human culture — different inputs. We then fill the space that opens up with other thoughts, other behaviors.

Self-observation becomes invaluable in this kind of exploration. Can one talk to clouds? Or to dolphins?

Acoustic communication? Holographic messages? The possibilities are endless. Could a change in diet shift our internal chemistry? We know certain seaweeds hold all the nutrients a person needs to survive. Could a simpler, less varied diet also make the body more sensitive, more still, with less complex input to process?

Mind wandering...

February 7, 2000

7 a.m. — a pod of pilot whales and dolphins is sighted to starboard. We change course to try to get closer. The dolphins are active around the outside of the circle, while the pilot whales stay still at the center. We cut the engine, but the current carries us past them.

I feel a strong urge to get in the water, but let reason rule over passion this time.

Soon after, a squall brings good wind, and we're sailing again, in the right direction.

The sky clears, and the wind lets us sail east — six points off, the Heraclitus surfs every wave. Blue, sailing the blue. Magic.

The helm becomes an art — there's no recipe for it, only a feel. The ship becomes an extension of yourself, and you become one with her. Every wave becomes a ride.

Following the coast of Papua New Guinea, the land still feels distant, but Nemo's is getting crowded — I've pulled out books on the local cultures. Rough stories: cannibalism, headhunting raids, extreme violence. It's a reminder that we take so much of our human behavior and ethics for granted, but humanity is more complex than that — another window into the debate on evolution. A man left to an anarchic lifestyle can only work toward survival of the fittest, and on an individual level, without a code of honor or life ethics, the more violent, brutal, ruthless, and physically strong warrior will outlive another — unless a shared belief emerges that a person's survival is essential to the continuation of the tribe.

The West has romanticized these tribes for their photogenic appeal, while glossing over the fierceness of their actual lifestyle.

Most ships, at some point, come to share a common "shipboard culture," with identical themes, scenes, and often dreams — the environment calls for identical behaviors.

I've set new rules for myself. When I'm not on watch, I check in from time to time, but I try hard to stay out of the way, so operations happen without my input unless truly necessary. It's a hard line to hold, but I think it's good for the ship's future — and to avoid crossing roles

the way I've seen happen so often on past expeditions. Better to be a support than a trigger.

So I keep a low profile, except perhaps at dinner — since I love good conversation, and feel I have plenty to contribute. But too much input gets lost in the noise, so less is often more. I need to watch myself on that front.

The luxury of time lets me study like never before — I'm brushing up on anthropology, philosophy, seamanship, and finding time to paint, too.

*redefine the potentiality of evolution within the
form,
celestial mechanics,
for oceano fanatics.*

February 8, 2000

A strange day — everyone a little more edgy than usual, any comment liable to turn into an argument. Vigilance is the order of the day. The lab is steady, and lunch palatable — I cooked a tomato soup and rice pudding. We're totally out of fresh food, and cooking has become a real test of creativity.

We try, eight separate times, to tack without the engine — impossible; the Heraclitus won't do it. We can't raise the mizzen either — one of the shrouds is rusted through.

Dream-filled naps, still these recurring futuristic settings, and chases toward a destination I never quite know. This time I find myself in a huge restaurant belonging to some kind of tycoon. He bought up a stretch of sacred land and built a new one, dredged from the edge of the sea. He's obviously a bad man, one who had to use force to acquire the land. I overhear that the last holdout has signed. We're ready now.

In the restaurant we order sake; there's strange holographic decoration — the communication of the future.

Our Thursday-on-theater night — the monthly gathering of the Blue Planet Ensemble.

*Theater,
ancient Greek word meaning to see,
and how can man use,
synergetically,
his senses to "see."
incarnation,
with the help of visualization, intention, and
attention,
studying history,
studying the evolution of man.
I sit on the bow,
I could be a thousand years away,
past or future,
gazing at the stars.
without communication with mankind,
and no information available but reason and
feeling.
I see that the stars move,
I can, after a day, locate an island,
and safely return to my starting point, using
observation alone.
but how much of that is drawn from know-how,
mathematical programs,
theories already learned?
the evolution of a newborn is formed.
through theater,
man can mold himself into different forms,
losing, or forgetting, the "I,"
to tap into the many "I's,"
many eyes,
many ways to see,
theater, the art of different seeing.*

A story, or a frame, or a form.

A magician, or prophet, or storyteller comes by boat to different places and tells his adventures. He carries a huge cape onto which slides can be projected, and music can play, and actors appear to perform a scene, or a song.

He mixes his stories with gods and myth and science and culture, entertaining and teaching through parable — Sufi stories, or dialogues, or meetings with figures out of history: say, Socrates meeting Armstrong on his return from the moon.

But the stories needn't stay with humans; they can include animals, universes, mathematical truths — art, abstract thought, non-linear thinking, emotional sound, image, intellect, gesture.

Coral reefs, distant stars, civilizations, belief, dogma, love, passion, war, philosophy — basically, a mixing pot of man's wonder, his realities and his imagination.

Mixing time and space to create the new — always the new, as Heraclitus said: you never step in the same river twice.

The difficulty with any theater ensemble — and this goes for humanity too — is simply agreeing on something. The tendency to create an opposing force seems inborn. One has to agree on a "director," able to channel and give direction to an ensemble. The director needs to feed off, and feed, his actors — sensitive to the potential and desire of the group, but also carrying the vision, and able to communicate it.

The birth of a tree.

The dance of the coral reef.

The ship sailing, and the wind.

Stars and cosmos, suns and planets.

Mushroom-shaman dance.

Darwinian evolution.

The sixth kingdom, a theory of symbols.

Plant, bacteria, protista, fungi, animals, and human.

Different cultures.

February 9, 2000

Start the day with a smile — sunrise on the bow, no rain, a flat sea, a quick glimpse of dolphin fins passing, and the islands around us.

I spend most of the day sorting slides, and catch up with Eibis — it's time to settle into my role and set direction, for the expedition and the crew alike.

I'll begin by meeting with everyone about their plans for the near future, start a newsletter for our friends of the Heraclitus, and begin building a website.

Tonight dolphins play at the bow — a bioluminescence delight.

This afternoon, during acting class, we did skits about our inability to catch any fish. By pure synchronicity, no sooner had we finished than schools of fish began jumping around the ship.

We scraped the hull; an oceanic triggerfish came to visit, and a nice little jack passed right in front of my face. I grabbed the spear, jumped back into the water, but it had already disappeared. My breath-holding is getting better — we need to keep up these swim blessings.

My hair is turning blond again, Rich noticed. I'm breathing the sea again.

I started a talk on celestial navigation — more to learn for tomorrow. Maybe we'll start with a sun-fix at noon.

February 10, 2000

Started the day sorting and finishing the slides, and talking with people about their near-future plans. Sylvia and Daniel will leave from Papua New Guinea at the end of March.

Ferdi is staying on board for now. Brad is clearly torn, and will need to coordinate his timing with Rich.

We cleaned the galley thoroughly today, and Rich, with his homemade lure, caught a barracuda.

Thursday night on the origin of human culture — more specifically, the emergence of mankind.

*causes and effects,
our human perceptions,
the play of our senses,
magic mushrooms helping some apes?
a few artists in some cave in France,
a few skulls and artifacts here and there,
and theories on the move.
reason, faith, imagination,
man, the creature able to lie to himself,
a labyrinth of a mind gone wild?
why do we want to know?
existentialist,
knowledge only through experience?
are our intellectual games useless?
they hold wild power.
dreams have moved mountains,
brought man to the moon.
dictatorship killed millions,
revolutions and ethics,
liberté, égalité, fraternité,
and god,
nature's god,
the all-encompassing,
the sum of everything,*

*creator,
man in his footsteps,
imitation, a creature observing,
good and evil,
dual forces in equilibrium,
theories,
then strategies,
questions,
man, the creature that asks why,
and sets out to find out.
still in his infancy,
he rides the evolutionary wheel,
in a mad race for the survival of humanity,
Eden is in the mind,
realities and realities,
the question of what is truth,
thoughts,
the power of thought,
Shiva, the dance of destruction,
to be reborn in a new light,
only to be destroyed again,
shaping new,
always the new,
so as not to drown.
create, and run,
or it might catch up with you.
obsession, desire, passion,
fuel for our dreamlike illusion,
the magician, creating realities out of illusions,
creating a world in his own image,
losing himself in the process,
but you can rest, once out of sleep,
keep the attention going,
don't let it drop,
or big brother will hypnotize you in.
Eden is here right now,
everywhere there is light,
don't let the sun not shine on you,
simply alive,*

*miracle,
supernature,
simply nature.*

February 11, 2000

Dream-madness, waking up and slipping back into dreamland again and again.

I gave lab exercises today — interesting, to follow your own speech as you shift your attention.

The breath was hard to monitor, since my airways were busy with words.

Strat command to redefine everyone's positions. Brad wants to leave the ship for six months in June and July, and attend the France conference in October. Rich will leave in November for five months. Eibis will leave in April and return in December, or later. We'll stop in Jayapura for the shortest possible time, only to refuel and take on fresh food.

We redefined the roles on board as follows:

Michel: Expedition leader / Documentation / Financial controller / Synesthesia manager

Eibis: Captain / Dive captain / Safety / Rigging / Communication

Brad: First mate / Bosun

Rich: Second mate / Chief engineer

Reka: Third mate / Synesthesia manager / Petty cash

Qamar: Scientific coordinator / Electrics

Sylvia: Science / Medical officer

Alison: Steward, Librarian

Kirsten: Medicals, Synesthesia assistant

Ferdi: Radio officer / Electronics, computer

Daniel: Small-boat manager / Plumber

Maik: Woodwork

Brenda: Able-bodied seaman

Priska is doing great — she's keeping up with her schoolwork. My homework was finance; we're doing fine.

Comments and observations circled around the lab exercises from the morning.

The water is green — three rivers flow into the sea twenty miles away, carrying nutrients from the land that feed the algae, turning the water green or brown.

Plenty of logs around, carried out to sea, requiring vigilance on deck.

February 12, 2000

A strange acting class where I go a little mad — I get totally lost in the book I'm reading, **Sophie's World**.

Night out.

*Silent night,
the wind sleeps,
while the stars are dancing,
the moon hides,
but my heart rides,
the waves of eternity.
got to make wishes tonight,
shooting stars,
superstition, or wishful projection.
in the depths of night,
when my soul is longing,
a caress of your love.
my Aphrodite,*

*I like to believe you hear me,
compared to the stars,
you are not so far,
just a few light-seconds away,
and still closer,
when I hear my heart beat your song,
love is alive,
I dream of you,
my muse, my goddess.*

February 13, 2000

With Eibis I run the eight-to-twelve watch, to ease the changes. At 11:15, a huge pod of spinner dolphins comes close from the bow — hundreds of them, all around the ship, like a dance. The energy is high; they jump and race around the bow and stern. We heave to, and they keep on dancing, high spins in the air. We jump in the water — a group of fifteen is sighted.

Echolocation clicks everywhere, like a caress of sound. I jumped in naked, with fins and mask. The ocean is like a soup of plankton. I can feel sound all over me. I dive down, and the deeper I go, the louder and more intense the sounds become. A group comes straight at me, to within about four meters, but turns away when other people jump in with big splashes behind me. I am ecstatic — once again, just the moment, without intellect or thought rushing in. I keep diving down, holding still thirty feet down to listen. I get almost as much from the "quick" listening to the sound as from actually sighting the dolphins. You know they are "seeing" you with their sonar, forming a picture of you in their minds. I wonder how I look, from a dolphin's perspective.

I stay high on the plankton soup, diving deeper and deeper to hear the sound.

I get so much pleasure from that — though I can't speak for everyone. And it's only one perspective, my own, that

experiences it that way. There's another part of me, more analytical, that watches my own "illusions" afterward. But this is also the great debate about faith: to believe is to alter the chemical process of an experience, and give it a particular direction.

As an example: I believe dolphins are guides in my life. So an encounter with them holds a different significance for me than it might for someone who sees them as just another species.

Dolphins bring out a special state of mind in me. It's real, but I suppose only for myself. Does that make my experience invalid?

Another large group of dolphins is sighted around three p.m. They don't ride our bow — too far off. During our Sunday speeches, a few blows are seen; they're around us again.

*dolphins,
brothers from the sea,
friends of my mind,
somehow I am not dreaming,
when you come to greet me,
my soul is feasting.*

The speeches are so different from one another — different minds, different content — but everyone today tried to bring some depth to theirs.

I started with "my" idea of god. It's a question that keeps returning to my mind. "God," for me, is simply "all and everything," without censorship or selective ethics — the total sum of the universe, and and and..., including all the thoughts arising in man's mind. We could say man comes to know god better and better as he evolves.

There is, in my mind, no contradiction between science and the concept of "god" — one is simply getting closer to the other. Man's drive to know is his thirst for knowledge, and all knowledge is a step closer to

understanding consciousness. That we know little is clear; that we know a lot is also clear. It's simply the sum of all attainable knowledge, bounded by our own perceptive capabilities, that sets our limits. But nature has taught us that it "creates" the missing tool once certain steps have been reached. To be conscious. To be more conscious. Can consciousness be quantified? Many explorers of the mind have tried to map its territory, if only to give a point of reference. Man's state of mind, or consciousness, changes so rapidly it can't always be "caught" by the mind, or recalled.

But that doesn't mean our unconscious hasn't stored the information. It's actually quite logical to conclude that we hold all the information from previous stages in the development of our evolution. That it doesn't appear in our "conscious" mind may simply be because it isn't needed right now — it becomes part of our "hard drive."

The moon is up, shining between the shrouds and the mizzen mast. The stars hold their place in the sky. The thought of their scale alone can make one dizzy — billions of light-years, if we're to believe the conclusions of our scientific mind. And somewhere within these billions of light-years of space and time, we use our main conceptual tool to try to place ourselves in the universe — we start with location in space and time, and move from there. Is time linear? From sensory experience, I can assure myself it is not; but by reason alone, I do not know. How can I put my inner thoughts into words?

Somehow, it's like faith, or the "concept of god," or knowing that you don't know that you know. You could go on with that one forever — forever, in the sense of eternity, and again we find ourselves caught up with the concept of time. There is no eternity without time, and no time without eternity.

We are a day away from Jayapura — our first encounter with the "outside" world in a month. How will the crew react? How will my own senses react?

On the gossip front, Rich and Alison are having an affair — a surprising development, though maybe not entirely. People do tend to pair up, especially removed from outside stimuli, unable to release the energies of attraction and repulsion any other way.

I tend to hold back from writing my observations about the people I live with — maybe to keep that garden private, or because I see it as too personal to record. A violation of privacy? Simply a hang-up of mine?

They're all observations that shape my understanding of humanity, and they would be invaluable to our study of the cultures we'll encounter along the way. I just can't quite do it with the people already on board — it's harder to observe your friends, or your family, objectively.

February 14, 2000

A heart cut out of paper hangs in my bunk. Happy Valentine's Day — Priska gave one to everyone. My present arrived at two in the morning: I'd fallen asleep on the bow, and dolphins came rushing in, six at a time, in a silver bioluminescent extravaganza. They stayed for over thirty minutes.

I woke to find the ship seven miles from Jayapura. I climbed the mast — a pod of spinners passed our stern, along with a lot of local fishing boats. For the first time since I got back, I took pictures — beautiful outriggers, like the Bajau boats of Sulawesi. The men are covered from head to toe with the hooded cloaks worn by sea pirates. They all come by to say hello to the black ship. We anchor around 10:30 in the bay.

Eibis goes ashore to sort out diesel and the official paperwork.

He radios us around 4:30: "Get the ship ready to dock on the port side — we're heading to a fishing dock."

We dock alongside a fishing trawler. Hundreds of people watch us, lots of kids — every face different, a melting pot of cultures: Papuan, Javanese, Sulawesi, Chinese, and everything in between.

The diesel truck arrives; Rich and Brad, with their usual efficiency, get the fuel on board.

The golden light of dusk wraps around everything. The dock sits in the middle of a stilt-house village. Boats come from all sides, and a photo frenzy nearly embarrasses me — but I can't blame anyone for it.

Rich starts shooting video with the Hi8 camera — he's getting hooked. Some people just aren't there when the moment demands urgency. Better to know your own weaknesses ahead of time.

We keep a sharp eye out, so no one trespasses onto the ship. We need to leave as soon as the fuel is aboard. It's already dark, and the harbor pilot is with us on board. The radio call goes out ahead of us — plenty of fishing boats along our route.

We haven't cleared customs, and officially aren't allowed ashore, but Reka, escorted by Maik, manages to bring back twelve frozen tunas to restock our supply.

We reach our new anchorage at 8:15. The shops and market close at nine.

We have no fresh food on board, and a three-week voyage ahead. With Reka, I dash into town with the pilot; he takes us to the market. We have little time — commando-style, we buy everything in sight: mango, pineapple, bananas, eggplant, eggs, you name it.

We even manage to find beer. We're technically in the country illegally, and take a real risk doing this, but

otherwise we might not get any food tomorrow — immigration hasn't yet agreed to let people ashore.

So it's almost midnight now, and it's been a full day.

February 15, 2000

Eibis, in town, deals with officials — immigration and the port authorities.

The crew shapes the ship up for our imminent departure to Manus Island, four hundred miles away.

We're fueled up, fresh food smuggled aboard overnight, all in less than twenty hours, in a country known for its complicated bureaucracy.

I pay for the diesel — eight hundred dollars — to the port captain. We spend our last rupiah on juice and roach killer, in preparation for our coming battles with the local insect population.

An odd mood on board prompts me to call a meeting to explain what we've achieved, and where our limits lie.

After four weeks at sea, the crew's real desire would have been to spend time ashore, but our stop turned into a commando-style operation: get what we need, and get out.

The meeting turns emotional and intense — some pressure released, I think.

We leave the port at one p.m.; Rich pilots us out. The sea is calm. For more than an hour, a school of rainbow runner follows our stern; I try, in vain, to catch one.

We raise sail, and here we are, in the big blue.

A pod of eight spinners swims by, and I try, almost comically, to catch their attention by blowing the didgeridoo into the water.

Comments and observations night, to clear the leftover feelings from the meeting, and a strong talk on documentation — particularly around the use of the camera.

I dream of my sister being eaten by a huge moray eel — it leaves me unsettled.

February 16, 2000

Acting class in the afternoon, scenes on the theme of wind.

Papua New Guinea night — we watch the documentary **Ring of Fire**, by the Blair brothers, about their adventures with the Asmat tribe. A funny evening, with strange costumes and a strong emphasis on the fact that the Asmat were once cannibals.

The day passes without any special event, the watches keeping to their duty, and I get absorbed in a book — the first time in months I've read something in French.

I got the blues today, thinking about Yvonne for a while, and my desire to be next to her.

February 17, 2000

With Eibis, I met with Brenda, Kirsten, and Alison to reassess their roles on board and catch up with them. Brenda will get more involved with documentation logistics, Kirsten will take over medicals and assist with Synesthesia. Alison gets defensive and leaves the meeting before we can discuss her role — a difficult situation.

In the afternoon we hold a strat command. We decide to stop at Hermit Island on the way to Manus for a dive stop; our tactic is to save fuel wherever possible. Unfortunately, we have headwinds, and the current is pushing us back. We discuss people, and roles.

I'm still finding my footing, defining my place as expedition leader.

Thursday night on William S. Burroughs — *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.* The discussion naturally turns to war and weaponry, with a side line into genetics.

February 18, 2000

We decided to stop at Hermit Island on our way to Manus. A big squall hits us in the night, heeling the ship over, water running along the port portholes. The current runs west. I took over Reka's watch — she wasn't feeling herself. Nice to get back to standing watch once in a while.

We watch an almost-full moon rising.

Then the computer, or the keyboard, stops working. We pull out all the spare laptops, and I end up fixing my own keyboard.

February 19, 2000

A huge pod of pilot whales is sighted around 9:30 — all around us, though they don't come close to the ship. They spread out over a mile, and travel north. The volume of cetacean sightings continues to be impressive.

I prepare the historical slide show for the upcoming full-moon party, hoping to help people understand where they are, and give them a sense of pride in being aboard.

I get wild, vivid dreams. Reka is a little frayed — worried, I think, about the acting class, and could use some support.

I cook a tuna curry for our party, music on, Bradley mixing cocktails. The slide show is a nice trip down

memory lane from the last expedition, and gives Eibis a chance to tell us a few Antarctic anecdotes.

A thought for Yvonne — it's her birthday. In her honor I spend time on the bow, sending her my love, though whether she receives it is another question.

February 20, 2000

The sunrise greets us over Hermit Island. As we approach the lagoon entrance, six sperm whales rest on the surface, blowing five times each — their blow unmistakable at that particular forty-five-degree angle. Then they dive, one by one, in a synchronized ballet, six tails going down together. A calf stays on the surface, following the divers. Then a pod of spinners comes rushing to the ship — curious, leaping and whistling all around us, more and more of them arriving. A grand reception. Two of us get in the water and glimpse them briefly; they keep a safe distance, just out of sight, though you can tell they're watching us — their echolocation is very precise. Eventually, the whole crew except Brad and Eibis is in the water. The dolphins don't disappear, but check us out from a distance.

A pilot whale then surfaces fifteen meters from the ship.

As we get back to the ship, an inquisitive three-meter marlin comes within a few feet of Reka, then vanishes — a truly majestic sight, a rare moment.

Brad pilots the ship into the lagoon, Eibis and I on the shrouds — I'm slowly becoming a permanent resident of the crow's nest.

The island is fringed with reef, and coconut palms grow on it — it's inhabited. Waves crash on the reef. In the lagoon we sight a "yellow shark." Birds are everywhere, and fish are jumping — a sea boiling with life.

The anchor sets securely in sixty feet of water, on a perfect sandy bottom.

We gather for a strat command meeting, and I propose making a short film for the ship's twenty-fifth birthday on the twenty-fourth. Reka's birthday is the twenty-third, and mine falls on the same day as the ship's — so we ought to celebrate in a grand manner.

We split the crew into two groups for a trip ashore.

The small island near the ship grows coconut palms used to make copra, but the mosquitoes get the better of us, and we all jump into the water. We go snorkeling on the cut afterward. Brad stays glued to the binoculars, watching huge waves break on the reef.

Rich gets "attacked" — his version, anyway — by a black-tip shark. They're territorial here, and clearly unafraid; we count more than eight in the space of half an hour, along with jacks, a school of rainbow runners circling in formation, and a school of huge barracuda — unusual to see adults schooling like that. They circle around me as I dive down, trying to get footage of a shark. We also spot the biggest porites coral head any of us has ever seen.

As we head back, a broken rainbow arcs across the sky.

A local man in his canoe hangs off the side of the ship — he speaks very good English. His name is Steve. We learn more about the island: there's a village of about a hundred people, and this is where they're from.

The area is known as "tiger country" — plenty of sharks here.

The community lives on copra, shark fins, and a particular kind of sea cucumber.

"We only fish for food. We don't sell fish. I heard from a yacht that in Bali, they catch fish so small" — he holds up his little finger to show the size.

"There are big dive boats that come here. We ask them for money, because they make a lot. But for yachts, we let them use the reef and the area for free.

"Manus is very expensive. Our economy isn't very good. Diesel costs three dollars for five liters. I have a forty-horsepower outboard at home, but it's too expensive to run now."

Rich asks if there are any special fishing techniques they use.

"There are traditional techniques using coconut leaves. You cut them into strips and tie them to a line, then circle the fish with them — they get trapped and stay inside the circle. Then we can spear what we want to eat, and release the rest.

"People have gardens, so we don't need much other food. But once a month a supply boat comes from the mainland, so we can buy rice.

"There's malaria on the island, and people now take medicine once a week. There's been a school here for three years."

We learn that the *Calypso* came here six or seven years ago and filmed the traditional fishing techniques. Steve asks me if "the old man" — meaning Jacques — has died.

Killer whales have reportedly been sighted once around the island — after our morning with the cetaceans, I don't doubt it.

Many fish live here: tuna, mackerel, sharks, rainbow trout, groupers.

The wind is already changing — the season is shifting early this year. We've noticed it ourselves, running against current and headwind.

I ask if I can bring the camera and film the village. "No problem."

It took Steve two hours to reach the Heraclitus from the village. He also points us to the right spot to dive — plenty of sharks. I guess it'll be a shark stop. But they're respectful of the environment, and don't use scuba gear. "If we start with that, we won't have anything left" — smart thinking, and vision for the future.

"How did you see us?"

"I live at the top of the island, and I took my binoculars. 'Ho, that's a big boat, three masts, black ship.' We communicate by SSB and VHF radio."

February 21, 2000

An early morning dive at six with Eibis — we drop onto the wall and move into the cut. We sight three sharks and three turtles. The coral isn't very healthy, but grows to superlative sizes.

Aboard the ship, a local boat brings two people from the village, Joseph the elder and Bob. We hold a meeting in Nemo's, and it turns out they require a fee for diving around the island — a way, I imagine, of boosting their economy.

Joseph carries a big smile, and laughs constantly — I suppose we must look funny to him.

Bob stays with us for a couple of days, "to supervise our activities."

We go diving with him, and the dive turns into a rainbow-runner festival — sharks on every dive and every snorkeling trip, often curious, coming right at us.

Another boat arrives with Steve and some spearfishermen aboard. Everyone gathers on deck, and around four p.m. Brad and I join them for a session of spearfishing on the reef. I bring the camera, and Bradley tries his hand at spearing.

We move in formation — four of them in the water. After a minute, a fish is speared, put at the end of a line, and we keep moving. The technique is to dive down, lie flat on the reef, and stalk the fish — very few misses. I go down and manage to stay as long as they do, getting good footage. We keep moving, watching for the sharks that come a little too close now and then. We work the reef for a mile along the edge of the drop-off. A school of rainbow runners passes, and — "shoot" — two are speared, roughly one out of every two shots landing.

The line trailed behind one of the divers fills with fish: triggers, snappers, jacks, all lined up.

During this time, we see more than twenty sharks, some coming quite close. We head back to the boat against the current. Before we reach it, we spot a school of bumphead parrotfish. One last dive, over a minute long, and we call it a day.

All the locals' teeth are stained red with betel nut.

Once back on board, Joseph, Steve, and the fishermen leave for their island; Bob stays with us. We have an "informal" Sunday dinner — toasts, and stories over the meal. Shark stories: Eibis tells us how, on another ship in the Bahamas, he and a spearfishing-obsessed shipmate once got caught in a circle of bull sharks. As they dropped their bag of fish, the sharks rushed in to devour and tear it apart. Ferdi recalls the time we were taking East German tourists on day trips off Madeira, and during our daily swim stop, a great hammerhead came right up to the port side of the boat — once everyone was safely back aboard.

Late at night, under a bright moon, I talk with Bob.

"The religion of the island is Seventh-day Adventist. I was a priest for two years."

"How do you become a priest?"

"I went to the mainland and took a twelve-month course. We use the Bible and a leadership manual with information on how to conduct services. I was secretary for the church for two years, but I resigned last week. We're building a new church now."

"When did the church come here?"

"In 1951, with German missionaries."

"What's your role on the island?"

"I took over the 'mayor' position from Steve. I record marriages and births, and note everything down for the government."

"Do you keep up the old traditions?"

"No. What we teach the children now is the traditional fishing techniques."

"Do you make good money from fish?"

"We only catch fish to eat. But we collect sea cucumber — we get good money for that. Every man harvests his own, boils and dries them, and we sell them for export to the mainland."

"Do you eat them?"

"No. Too chewy."

"Do you have a school?"

"Yes, for three years now. It's run by the church, but it's expensive — we're still paying for it. After primary school the children go to the big island for high school."

"How many children?"

"Fifty-seven children, and a hundred and twelve adults. More men than women. The whole island is one family lineage. I come from Ninigo — I sailed here once, met my wife, and we decided to marry."

"Is your population growing?"

"Yes, but we try to teach people to control themselves" — he gestures — "though it's not easy to control. If we don't manage it, within ten years we won't be able to sustain ourselves."

"The island seems very peaceful, no?"

"Very nice people. But once, a boat of our people went out and never came back. They were killed — the canoe was found in Port Vanimo. People from Ninigo. There's a lot of crime in PNG — people want to live in the city, but with no jobs, they turn to robbery. They have guns, and sometimes we're scared when other boats come to try to fish our grounds. We don't have guns here, but I want to get one, to defend ourselves.

"How do you manage power? We have three generators — two belong to the church, and one to Steve's father.

"He wants to learn to dive. It's really the exchange of information here that matters. Knowledge is for the future — money disappears very quickly."

February 22, 2000

6:00 dive with Sylvia and Alison, Brad tending the boat. A six-foot sand tiger shark is the highlight, along with a huge school of bumphead parrotfish. We spot three black-tips.

Brenda takes her dive test. Bob goes out on a dive with Eibis. A quick strat command organizes our shore trip, where we plan to document, interview elders, and see how the village is run.

A few people come aboard bringing two huge coconut crabs, which live on the nearby island feeding on coconuts and never leave land. We boil them — at least four hundred grams of meat on each — but the real delight is the creamy sauce from the "abdomen."

We feast like kings.

Tuesday night on inventions — I put forward a whole plan for a cetacean nation, starting with a rehabilitation center for captive dolphins, then human-dolphin facilities where dolphins can come freely to interact with people, and in a future of communication breakthroughs, the Heraclitus becomes a flagship ambassador on the world's oceans.

Brad invents research barges and an underwater hotel, in a brilliant presentation.

Genetics for the human future, by Daniel and Ferdy, has man turning literally square, in a hilarious performance.

Eibis presents on underwater habitats; Reka and Priska on a new-age version of the Heraclitus; Sylvia on automatic portholes; Kristen on fast-growing reef; Rich on the "wonder mug"; Alison on a communication grid; Brenda on language pills; Maik on a wind propeller.

Another late conversation with Bob — I promise to send him diving information, and we go over some dive-table theory. His great-great-grandfather was German.

I learn how the island manages its resources, with different parts of the reef reserved for different purposes — some harvested to help build the church, others open to anyone.

February 23, 2000

Woke with the sun. We set the boat up, and Eibis, Reka, Priska, Brenda, Bob, and I head toward the island to visit the village, tucked into a protected bay between two islands. We're greeted by everyone. We visit the church, thatched with palm leaves, and the school, where the teacher runs two classes at once, students facing opposite directions toward two different blackboards. The teacher introduces Priska to the class, and she tells

them about snow, and life in Germany. Afterward we're treated to watermelon, decorated with flowers.

There are a lot of boats on the shore — all Hong Kong boats. A crew came for a year and a half to fish out the area. Bob tells me they always brought a bottle with them, which I suspect was cyanide. They always came with compressors and hookah rigs, and cleaned the reef of every commercial species — grouper, Napoleon wrasse, all of it. They called it the "live fish project." The island didn't see much benefit from it; the deal was made out of Manus.

A lot of shipwreck debris has washed up near the village — a safety-raft cover, a marker buoy. The village counselor has kept a pet crocodile for ten years. Many faces here carry a trace of Western blood, and a lot of the kids' hair is bleached from the sea. The island feels deeply peaceful. Women weave baskets, children play in the fruit trees, mothers nurse their babies. The atmosphere is relaxed, easy. We look into each other's eyes and know we could happily stay here a while.

The islanders are wonderful gardeners, with a diverse diet — many of the women are already busy cooking lunch. The banana plants are fertilized with organic waste.

We learn that during the new moon, hundreds of manta rays visit the region.

The villagers are afraid of whales, I learn — an old belief, from a time when there was still war between islands. You only went out to kill, or to be killed, and whales were seen as soldiers sent to destroy the enemy.

A sperm whale once washed up on the island; a piece of whale bone remains as a relic. There's also a large canoe being readied, to bring people out to the ship — everyone's talking about tomorrow's big party. By ten we're back at the boat.

During our afternoon dive we settle on the wall. Bob brings his speargun. As soon as we drop down, I hear dolphins — close by, though they don't show themselves. He spears a surgeonfish; Rich holds it. A six-foot white-tip comes cruising in, and I rush over so Rich can release the fish. The shark circles a few times but doesn't go for it. By the end of the dive we run into a school of rainbow runners — Bob lands four, though quite a few of his spears miss. We're close to the breakers, and we all move together, riding the surge.

Once on board, we fillet the fish, while a few people bake cakes for tomorrow.

Sylvia, Daniel, Alison, and Eibis go off to do GPS mapping.

During a snorkeling session we hear dolphins underwater — Sylvia, Ferdi, Maik, and Daniel actually see them below. I'm too far off with the speargun, out on the reef, to catch sight of them; I spot them once, back on the boat. Bottlenose dolphins. A good omen for tomorrow's party.

February 24, 2000

As with most of my birthdays, we go on an early morning dive — we choose the inner reef. We drop onto a sandy slope; small garden eels peek from their holes and vanish as we approach. Plenty of sea cucumber on the sand flat. A devil ray glides overhead. A white-tip shark rests on the bottom — I'd thought they had to keep moving. A turtle passes by, and more white-tips. Eibis points out a green moray eel. Daniel suddenly feels dizzy and heads to the surface.

We watch a Spanish dancer perform. A school of bumphead parrotfish hovers at twenty feet, then a spotted eagle ray glides right beneath us. A magic dive.

A health department boat comes alongside — engine trouble, and they'd heard on the island that there was a ship nearby that could help. They're headed from Ninigo to Manus, the boat loaded with sea turtles, a gift for the opening of a new health office.

There's still a strong tradition of sailing-canoe racing on Ninigo. Like everyone we meet, they confirm the shifting weather patterns — the season has already moved two months early. Even "El Niño" has entered their vocabulary.

On board, we get busy preparing for the party — pizzas, banana bread, flans, baked fish, cheese sticks, juices. On deck, Alison decorates the ship; Brad, with John's help, puts up the signal flags; Rich sets up the music. The islanders are due to arrive at three.

Two boats are sighted — a huge canoe carrying over fifty people, three boatloads in all. We gather everyone on the stern. Every hand arrives bearing food, flowers, fruit, vegetables. Bob tells us afterward that, except for nine people, the whole village came — a hundred and forty-seven people, plus ourselves, for our twenty-fifth-year celebration.

People are everywhere; food is served constantly. Eibis gives a welcome speech, and Bob introduces us to the community.

Meanwhile mothers nurse their children and serve food; everyone is remarkably disciplined. Then the women of the village sing a song:

"Happy birthday, happy birthday to you, happy birthday, dear Michel, happy birthday to you, how old are you now, how old are you now, happy birthday to you." Then everyone claps out the number of years — thirty-four claps — and we repeat it for Reka, and for the ship. A touching moment; the voices are very soft. They don't need to shout to be heard. We sing a sailor's song in

return; they answer with an island song filled with the spirit of the sea. Everyone is moved. We sing another. The contrast between our songs and theirs is almost comical.

As the sun goes down, we set up the video and show the dry-dock movie, then footage of the reef. All the kids know the fish by name, some gesturing spearfishing motions whenever a particularly tasty one appears.

Then we show the footage we shot on the island, and underwater. Great fun.

The crew hosts beautifully, and up front Brenda learns some island songs — a magic evening. By eight, everyone has left. We clean up and celebrate quietly under the stars with a beer; a few of us chew betel nut, for a slight buzz.

John leaves early the next morning to hunt coconut crab. He's successful, and brings back four — using fire to smoke them out of their holes. I'd left a box of matches by his bed before turning in.

February 25, 2000

The dive goes out at six; I join to snorkel and spear, and catch a red snapper. There are plenty of sharks around — I keep the fish at a safe distance, at the end of the line. One shark comes close, smells the fish, but can't quite locate it, since I've been trailing it for a while. A devil ray glides through the pass.

I pay Bob for our stay — a hundred and twenty US dollars. We've received so many gifts: fish, coconut crab, vegetables, fruit, but most of all, more people aboard the RVH than we've ever hosted at once. It couldn't have been just a small party.

The reefs here are divided into sections, owned by different families, much like land ownership on shore —

so if you want to dive in a certain area, you need permission from whoever owns that stretch of reef.

Bob understands the importance of keeping the sharks alive rather than depleting them. With the tourists who come to see them, he says: "They look at the shark, we make a little money, but we still have the shark."

Of course, part of his interest is also in gaining influence on the island — he's still something of an outsider. The island really belongs to Joseph and his family. Bob dreams of one day going back to Ninigo, and showing them what he's built here.

February 26, 2000

Joseph and his son clearly run the island. His son also serves as "chairman" of the northwest island confederation.

Joseph told Rich how, a long time ago, two chiefs from the Ninigo island group built two war canoes and came to Hermit Island. The villagers used up all their spears at once; the invaders' canoes collected the spent spears and drove the villagers into the center of the island, where a rain of spears killed many of them. This is how the island's people became "Ninigo people," and adopted their language — the old one disappearing.

Though now Christianized, old beliefs persist. The villagers believe there are precious stones in the water — that the Americans, during the fighting of the Second World War, were trying to retrieve a great diamond buried in the sea. There was once a great storm of stones, they say, killing many people on Manus Island.

Later, German missionaries arrived, hoping to run plantations, but failed — leaving behind a legacy of gardening and church instead. The islanders traded their grass skirts for clothes, and the women cut their hair.

It's often difficult to pin down accurate dates, or even ages — most islanders don't know their own age, and a skin-diver here can stay under for a remarkably long time, up to two hours; at the outer edge of human capability, divers have been known, in exceptional cases, to reach six or seven minutes underwater.

The harvest of sea cucumber and shark fin remain the only commercial avenues for most remote islands — without refrigeration, the dried products can still be stored.

But the shark cleans the reef of sick fish, and the sea cucumber acts as its vacuum cleaner. Without them, the water turns murky, sediment and algae taking over.

The reef around Hermit wasn't healthy, and the fish population weak — the Hong Kong crew mentioned earlier stripped it bare. You should be able to see big grouper, snapper, and the rest, but there are none; even sharks aren't as plentiful as they should be. A lot of reef has been damaged by cyanide, and bombing has left whole sections overgrown with algae, suffocating the coral.

We raise anchor at 10:30. Headwind from the east. I climb the mast, hauling the camera up with me, and shoot panoramic views of the islands and the reef, and the Heraclitus threading the pass. The sea grows rough, and I struggle to keep my balance up there. I spot a huge tiger shark, three hundred meters off the edge of the reef — at least fifteen feet, maybe more.

We travel slowly, two and a half knots.

February 27, 2000

The current is against us, with a headwind. During the night, the mizzen shrouds on the starboard side snapped; we rigged the mast with the halyard block.

Strat command meeting to review our situation — we'll need to study the weather patterns and currents to see whether we can actually make it to the Solomon Islands.

Daniel and Sylvia will leave at the end of our stay; Sam and Qamar are returning, along with a new member, Rebecca. Priska will lose her bunk.

Our budget needs readjusting, given fuel costs and expensive food supplies — but worst case, we simply lower our standards for a while.

Our main objectives are to work on the rigging, conduct the coring, and keep training people, while continuing to film as we go.

The theater side of the ship needs some attention and coordination among the officers on board — building a kind of third mind around it.

I've been reading about Cousteau's expeditions in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean, more than thirty years ago. How much more civilized we are, by comparison — though at times I don't feel firm enough in the tasks we've set out to accomplish. My desire is to make a film, or films, and books, but we'll need to shift our attitude quite a bit. Brad and I talk about filming, and decide to edit drastically, keeping only impeccable footage — always keeping an eye on the light.

We watch the previous week's interviews for our acting class. I cook dinner with Brenda, and we hold our Sunday-night speeches. We're still struggling against wind and current.

We hope to reach Manus by three tomorrow afternoon.

This will mark the end of our forty-five-day voyage from Bali to Manus.

Chapter Two

Manus Island, Papua New Guinea

February 28, 2000

We reach the entrance of Seeadler Harbor around 2:00 p.m., greeted by a pod of bottlenose dolphins. Rich pilots the ship in, and by 3:00 we're anchored half a mile off Lorengau, the only town on Manus. Eibis goes ashore to clear us in, but the immigration office is already closing. "Tomorrow morning, sharp." Sharp, in PNG, turns out to mean somewhere between eight and noon. Time doesn't ride the same wavelength here.

An old machine-gun emplacement at the edge of "town," rusted through, is a reminder of Manus's past. During the Second World War, up to six hundred warships anchored in this bay, and over a million American soldiers passed through the island. There's still a base here, used now by the PNG Navy.

We dine in peace, recalling our forty-four days at sea.

*Opinions,
tunnel realities,
conversations,
leave and take,
information selection,
I select to create a reality,
expand perception,
without losing the foundation,
the rolling waves crashing the reef,
the halyard banging on the mast,
a page turned from a book,
the breath,
the stars and immensities of the universe,
science as a stepping stone,*

*a tool, but just a tool, to understanding,
marvel, mysteries,
an answer gives birth to more mysteries,
the dreams,
but still limited to their own perceptions,
creativity is only a new combination of what
already is,
infinities,
a concept man struggles to accept,
but seeks,
immortality.
as a unique combination,
I live as an entity,
we broke through perceptions with psychedelics,
but some visions are too far,
to play,
that we cannot yet understand,
I believe in a god,
because I can,
I do not believe what I want, but what I can.
we are the dream of a dream,
who dreamed us?
who are we dreaming of?
are we dreaming ourselves?
our dreams are shaping the evolution of some
men.
mutants,
Hommodelphinus, Hommoaquaticus,
Hommomarsus,
Hommo earth,
the sixth kingdom,
in its own creation process.
we transform our appearances,
is it to be different,
seeking what we are not,
or becoming what we can be.*

February 29, 2000

By 7:00, Eibis is ready and heads first to the port authorities. Onshore, Qamar is waiting — hugs and greetings. She'll leave the ship in the Solomon Islands, to further her education and work with Phil Dustan at the College of Charleston. Around 10:00, I go to change money, our first introduction to the kina, and send our first fax. The kina was originally a kind of shell, once used as currency. The streets are stained red with the spit of betel-nut chewers — the local drug of choice.

Most of the women here have tattoos on their faces. One person told me they were clan tattoos, so everyone would know where you were from; but when I asked someone else, she said she'd simply had it done in town, to look more beautiful. In that light, the word makes sense — full of beauty. Local fashion.

Australia's influence is obvious in the supermarket — shelves well stocked with butter, milk, peanut butter, canned soup, brown rice, an Australian specialty you won't find anywhere else in Asia. Vegetables, though, are scarce, even at the market.

By 2:00, the ship is tidy and clean, and we wait for the officials to arrive.

Hosted in Nemo's, they proceed to inspect the ship — an Australian-style formality, no doubt where they were trained.

The crew heads ashore; Eibis, Reka, Priska, Ferdi, and I stay on guard. We raid Ferdi's stash of goodies.

March 1, 2000

After more than two hours trying to get cash out of the bank, I gave up — the card was denied. I met the health officer and we got to talking. There's an old cult in one of the western villages, where a "shaman" used to call in

dolphins. He died seven years ago; the story was confirmed to me on three separate occasions. Whether it really happened, or people are simply collective storytellers, hard to say — they'll be adamant about almost anything you ask.

Manus is known for producing minds. There are few cash crops here, and little in the way of local production — the economy runs largely on highly educated people holding government positions elsewhere, sending money back home.

I went to the Manus radio office, where John, the manager, let me use his internet access. He has a brother who's a lawyer working on fisheries issues. Messages waiting from Paris, where Michèle has a lead on a movie about the RVH; another about a UFO sighted in Indonesian waters, asking if I'd witnessed anything; and a disturbing message from Yvonne, saying she won't be coming to the ship this year, and that she's giving up on America.

Two new volunteers are arriving in Manus, Karen and Orla.

After a stroll through the market, a small lunch.

We decide to split the crew into two groups, to explore the island over the next two days.

We announce our strategic plans for the schedule: stay in Manus until March 7th, then head to an outer atoll before returning for five days to prepare for the next leg of the voyage.

March 2, 2000

Eibis, Reka, Priska, Rich, Alison, and Maik head off on their expedition — eight of us remain on board. I work out the finances, write messages.

I meet with the minister of tourism. They're in the process of promoting Manus as a tourist destination, but starting from scratch — there's nothing here yet except one hotel. They're looking at ecotourism, realistically the only option given the lack of infrastructure. On Los Negros, all the villages have taken American city names, so you can stroll through "Chicago" or "Los Angeles." Few sailing canoes remain — everyone's switched to Japanese sails and outboard motors.

On the street I meet Pierre, a Frenchman who's lived here five years. He's written ten articles about the area and is trying to set up a diving business; he brought a French film crew here once for a documentary. He tells us about ten-meter saltwater crocodiles, man-eaters — twenty-four people killed in twenty years, the biggest crocodiles in the world. I recall reading that he once discovered a rare nautilus found nowhere else. We talk about killer whales, and about Cousteau's old footage.

The stove runs out of fuel and breaks down. We have a cold Thursday-night meal, but a hot debate on evolution — the almost-classic argument between Brad and Daniel in full swing.

Michel:

*there is no first, only a synergetic movement,
not independent,
a web,
moving full speed ahead,
moving with the flow.
the flow can be ethically repulsive,
or paradisiacal,
paradise, like beauty, is in the mind of the
beholder,
new civilizations merging,
information madness,
a grid speeding the advance,
information wars,
the quest for know-how,*

*artificial intelligence, or simply a tool created to
free space in our minds?
on board, we are witnesses above all,
sentinels of a planet gone mad,
starting with being conscious of being alive.
it isn't a given,
but a discipline.
did the myths foresee the future,
the centaur, half man, half bull,
genetic engineering,
all our old tales recreated,
in a mass mutation, a manipulation,
the four-armed man,
or the dance of Shiva,
destruction,
reconstruction,
the creation of dreams,
science fiction, simply a possible evolution,
evolution, the name of the game,
are we really looking at the survival of the
species?
not consciously,
because man is an individual,
domesticated, manipulated,
through his own perception.*

March 3, 2000

The morning is spent fixing the stove. I took all the fuel lines apart, and for three hours lay on the galley floor, greased head to toe, looking very much like a Rich look-alike.

I pick up Pierre, and he brings along his book on Manus. I sense we have a lot in common, and we get to talking about all sorts of things. There have been incidents of ships stripped for parts, and people killed, on Lou Island. At first he's guarded about sharing details, but we relax into it. He's spent five years researching the area, and,

with his journalist's instincts, is always "hunting" for stories.

I go up to oil some blocks at the top of the main mast — happy to take part in the ship's work, and I love being up there, the bird's-eye view.

Eibis, Reka, and Priska visited a village and received the warmest possible welcome — they'll tell that story themselves.

Maik bought out the entire stock of stamps from the post office, and even managed to find the unfindable: postcards.

I pick up Rich and Alison from the dock. Rich's lips are red from chewing betel nut, and he's limping, having fallen from a waterfall. They both come back radiant from their adventure.

The evening is spent trading travel stories.

March 4, 2000

5:30 a.m. — I drop Brad, Sylvia, and the surfboards off at Hawaii Island. The sun hasn't risen yet, and we sit quietly for the ride over. Unusually clear water lets us slip through a tight passage without trouble. The reef looks healthy. Fishermen in outrigger canoes cast their lines. We meet the chief and ask permission to visit his reef — you can't just pop in and swim around here. As at Hermit, the sea's resources are divided among the clans.

I get a ride to the "end of the road," where the last missionary outpost works to convert the "savages" to the ways of the Lord — not without conflict. Each denomination fights for its own territory: Seventh-day Adventists against Lutherans against Catholics. I follow a path through dense jungle and step out onto a black-sand beach.

Waves crash on the shore. Huge driftwood logs lie everywhere. A few thatched-roof houses dot the coast. I come to a river and swim across, not without some apprehension — large crocodiles are known to live in these waters, and more than thirty people have been killed around Manus.

Naked kids fish along the shoreline. I stop at a house and chew a few betel nuts. The people are friendly, but I sense an undercurrent of something darker — these were, not so long ago, warrior communities.

I keep walking through copra plantations, with a view out to the outer reef. I ask about the man who used to call in dolphins — in this area, they're believed to be part human.

There are dugongs here too.

Another river to cross — this time I barely make it, the incoming tide rushing hard against me. I spot a village in the distance and ask for a ride back; we're twenty kilometers from Lorengau.

With the whole village pitching in, we haul the boat over a sandbar using rolled branches — six people join in. More betel-nut chewing; I learn there are different strengths.

Back in Lorengau, I sit at the market and watch people go by. Most of the fish for sale is smoked, and a few cuscus — cute little marsupials, sadly destined for someone's dinner table — sit for sale in rattan baskets.

I get back to the ship just as Pierre pulls alongside:

"Anybody want to dive?" I jump on his boat, and for over an hour we search for a wreck fifteen miles out. Pierre's forgotten his fins, so we decide to dive with one fin each. I reassure him I've done it before — we haven't come all this way just to stay dry.

It's a nice dive, good coral formations, and one very inquisitive jack. But on surfacing, we get swept by a current — hard enough with two fins, let alone one apiece and a tank on your back. The tender is asleep, and our whistles and shouts go unanswered. I leave my gear with Pierre, take his one fin, and swim to fetch the boat myself. We get back to the ship, then pick up Brad from the island — he'd been snorkeling off an outrigger.

We spend the evening at Pierre's house. It takes ten people to haul his boat onto its trailer. Plenty of talk about psychology and biology — he mentions the interesting differences in behavior between volcanic and non-volcanic islands, and offers a few good tips on writing for publication, without giving away any real secrets. Intuitive, observant, clearly working toward something of his own — though he probably wouldn't fit well on the ship, for all that he calls himself open-minded.

We have wonderful conversation, a skill the French seem to particularly indulge in, and sleep there, through a downpour in the middle of the night.

March 5, 2000

"Would you like to dive a cave?" No need to say more. We run to the ship, I get my gear together, and off we go, driving to the western tip of Manus. We stop at a village to visit the chief, who sits in an old desk chair with a newspaper-rolled cigar, holding court with his people. We ask for his help, and set off trekking through the jungle. We reach a water hole at the edge of a cliff — kids from the village stare at us like we're aliens.

We enter the cave with our torches, carefully managing our buoyancy so as not to stir up the silty bottom, and penetrate about a hundred meters in. At the end, an opening drops straight down. It takes real discipline not

to keep going — that pull to push further has cost plenty of divers their lives.

Unexplored territory, where no one else has ever been. An intellectual thought, but an exciting one.

We eat a quick snack on a beach along the road, and grab a swim before heading back to the ship.

Many people come to visit. The women sing church songs, beating out the rhythm with sticks on the garamut, the local drum — a hollowed length of wood. The kids play around us, Rich films, Alison entertains, and there's a steady traffic of the small boat, back and forth. Around 6:00 we make our last drop-off, and pick up Pierre.

Suddenly a squall hits us. The anchor chain sits oddly, ninety degrees off the hull — we're dragging. Emergency mode: we start the engine, pay out more chain, and ride out the storm. I give Pierre a ride back through huge swells — I love it, that wake-up call from a sea that doesn't tolerate carelessness. We had to be sharp.

March 6, 2000

We dive the anchor — soft mud on the bottom, following the chain by feel, hands digging through the muck, unable to see each other. The anchor's sitting with its flukes up; we'll have to reset it.

Strat command meeting, mainly about our route. The plan: leave in June from the Solomons, arrive in Singapore after a two-month voyage, and get the ship into dry dock as fast as possible.

We get an email telling us the Asenearian expedition has been postponed to April 2001 — not great news. It would cost us a year on our plan to cross the Pacific from east to west.

News from Yvonne, too — she's grown restless in Holland, searching for her direction, reconsidering our relationship, uncertain about a life on the ship.

Ferdi left for Germany today. He plans to be back within two months.

Sunday speeches, mostly about our travels — the reports are hilarious, but full of insight. As a team we scattered in every direction and, between us, brought back a good overview of the island.

A possible film or story idea:

The Vanishing Talking Drums, the Garamut.

The drum lies on deck — people from the mainland brought it here as a gift for the ship.

In the village, one man still knows all the beats. He's blind. He could tell the story.

In the school they're teaching some of the old traditions, including drum playing.

The drums are used for traditional dances, "sing-sings," with costumes woven from sago leaves.

Images from a dance session.

On top of the mountain, a man beats the drums — the village knows a celebration is arriving.

The Heraclitus sails out, drumming a farewell and waving goodbye to the shore.

[March 7, 2000](#)

The ship sets sail today for Hanahan Island, ten days out. The usual departure crunch — last messages sent, food loaded, ship put in order, the small politics of leaving.

Brad pilots us out. Rich has grown distant, and I don't know what to do about it. He seems to be withdrawing,

showing flashes of something sharper than usual — not in gesture, but in the words and tone. I feel strange myself since the message from Yvonne. Somehow I don't want to accept it.

We're sailing again, and I'm home. Swells break against the reefs, and scattered rain clouds threaten along the horizon.

We run three-hour watches. Eight miles out, Daniel raises concerns about our safety — he wants weapons kept ready on deck. We've heard enough alarming rumors about Lou Island to raise the hair on your neck — fishermen chopped up and sold for organ transplants. That's how rumors escalate.

The crew of a yacht was stabbed a few months back, though, so it's not entirely without grounds.

March 8, 2000

Eibis and I decide to change course and try another island, but the wind keeps shifting, and we can't find anywhere to anchor. Squalls keep hitting us — the area doesn't seem to want us here. We read a letter from David, worried about the Tambuan being lonely — they usually travel in pairs, and this one has been separated from its partner, Marie. We decide to head back to Seeadler Harbor and anchor off Hawaii Island, closer to the reefs. The weather seems to agree with the plan — the current carries us back, rain washes the deck, and by 5:00 p.m. we're anchored and secure in seventy feet of water on a sandy bottom. We'll sleep well tonight.

Nemo's turns into a video lounge — *Good Morning, Vietnam.*

Eibis and I dive the anchor, taking our time, playing with sea stars and small gobies, and collecting sand dollars for Priska.

The island chief visits — we'll need to negotiate for diving rights here.

We already know the coring work won't happen. There's no way to get the equipment underwater without being noticed, and officially, we're just a tourist yacht.

March 9, 2000

We spend the day on the rigging. I perch myself on the main mast, working the shrouds — I feel good up there, letting the wind play against my skin. A few meetings, scheduling our stay. The outboard gets a tune-up. The crew is in motion.

I work through the finances, planning the days ahead.

March 10, 2000

Acting class in the morning; the science team heads out to scout. Video lounge, siestas.

I free-dive the anchor — first warming up with two dives to fifty feet, coming up slowly. Once I settle into my breath, I go down properly — a minute and a half, reaching the bottom at seventy feet, following the chain. Straight down, I might have touched close to a hundred feet. I notice the rush of urgency to breathe as I shoot back toward the surface.

We go for a quick snorkel; I drift into a trance over the sand flats. I spot a clownfish I've never seen before, one I can't find in the fish book.

March 11, 2000

An easy Sunday — no wake-up call, no lunch duty, no watches. Reka, Eibis, Priska, and I visit the island. We meet Joel, president of a confederation of four islands,

and negotiate our stay — every island owns its own reef, and charging a fee to use it is the norm.

We agree to write up a description of the island and help promote his "guest house."

We take a tour. The island is remarkably well kept and clean. We sit at the water's edge and talk fishing — mackerel run during the new moon; for barracuda, you need to troll slowly; there's turtle-spearing, and more. The Americans built a base here during the Second World War, cutting a road straight through the middle of the island, now shaded by huge trees where bats feed and birds sing.

A magic dive: a giant stingray, a shoal of rainbow runners, two spotted rays hiding under a ledge, sweetlips, some large emperor fish, and a small school of a dozen jacks.

March 12, 2000

A quiet day — nothing special, which is exactly what makes it special. Baggywrinkle and daydreaming.

March 13, 2000

A trip into town to pick up Orla — she's not there. I buy some food, and meet Joel, who fills me in on a conflict: some of his men got into a fight with Ron Knight, a local fish dealer — a bloody scuffle three days ago, right around the time four of the men involved came by the ship. Their eyes were red with violence, almost animal. I remember staying on guard, gently but firmly keeping them off the ship.

I check my email — a nice message from Gaie and Johnny, but nothing from Yvonne. My heart feels heavy, somehow.

March 14, 2000

Got dropped off and hired a van to pick up Orla from the airport. On the way into town I meet Tello, a Taiwanese fish businessman and former microbiology researcher, now setting up a station to catch tuna and shark — he's secured a permit for offshore line fishing. He's full of stories, and has traveled extensively. Ten years ago he was in Belize, trying to start a shrimp farm; the project fell through for political reasons. He used to work as a decompression diver, testing tables — x-rayed underwater, with a personal record of two weeks living below the surface.

We learn the governor has thrown out the Hong Kong company that stripped Hermit Island's reefs bare — they'd been using cyanide throughout.

It rains all day, not a patch of blue sky, no stars to be seen.

I go on a reef-check dive, a new monitoring system Alison's been promoting — it turns out to be something of a joke; all I had to do was count six butterflyfish. I set that project aside in favor of a more serious survey of the reef.

Joel comes by late, after a day out fishing — we trade for a dogtooth tuna, ten kina.

There's a dispute brewing between four men from Hawaii Island and some others in Lorengau — the four claimed fish from an outside fisherman, and it turned into a bloody fight. For the next two days, Ron Knight waits in town with a shotgun, looking for one of them, wanting retaliation.

So no one from Hawaii Island goes into town. Joel works to smooth things over with the authorities, but also calls a meeting of neighboring island chiefs — he's

threatening to block the harbor entrance to all ships if the matter isn't settled. Could turn into quite a story.

Pak Island is famous for its "rascals" — armed men who raid the town from time to time.

I give a slide show for our Tuesday-night gathering, then sit on the bow meditating with music around one in the morning. Sylvia tells me a dolphin came by for a visit. Interesting — my "lab" work tonight felt intense, almost loving.

March 15, 2000

A meeting with Orla first thing, then a dive. As we anchor, a bottlenose dolphin surfaces ten feet from the tender. Plenty of fish — grouper, tuna, mackerel, a seven-foot silvertip shark, batfish — though much of the coral is bleached, and algae covers over forty percent of the reef.

Joel drops by — there's a meeting on Hawaii Island tomorrow, hosting three neighboring islands, and they're preparing a feast for the guests to discuss fishing rights.

In order to save mankind, we need to take care of the blood of planet Earth — the oceans.

Joel brings us red emperor fish. Under the kerosene lamps, I fillet them — still fresh enough to feel that tension of a recent kill.

March 16, 2000

A dive on the other side of the channel — the swells are too high for the outer reef, so we stay inside for Brenda's open-water certification dive.

I get dropped off on the island, where the meeting is held under a tarp — four different islands represented. Joel

holds it together, frantically taking notes; his brother, the actual chief, represents Hawaii Island. The people are remarkably disciplined, taking turns to speak; each group has a spokesperson representing their point of view. The issue is fishing rights and legal boundaries — the proposal is to refuse foreign fishing boats access to Seeadler Harbor.

Some speakers get emotional, nearly shouting their positions. I sit quietly under a coconut tree, watching. Every so often a break is called; the men pass around betel nut, and hand-rolled tobacco in strips of newspaper. Close to eighty people are watching.

I sit next to Philip, Joel's son. He's trouble — asks me if we can smuggle firearms to the island. He's clearly part of some "gang," causing problems, and I wouldn't be surprised if this whole meeting is partly to protect his own skin. Ronny Knight got beaten up in town and wants to shoot one of them in return.

Once the meeting wraps up, I talk with Kallen, the island chief's daughter — sweet, pretty. I ask about the pattern of relationships here. She's twenty-five, unmarried, and works at the courthouse. I ask: "Is there much trouble here in Manus? You'd be in the best position to know."

"Sure — a lot of rape, and adultery. And fights between villages."

Joel dresses in traditional costume, and we take a few photographs; I get dressed up too. We drive back to the Heraclitus, and Joel, his brother, Kallen, and their families join us for dinner.

I have a good conversation with the chief.

"We have to look out for our future," he says. "If our fish are gone, our children won't be able to eat. In our culture, we can survive on our own resources. In yours, you need money — you can't survive without it."

I reply: "Think of your reefs as a bank account. The fish are your savings. If you let someone else harvest them, they'll take everything they can. You'll get some money for fuel and other goods, but your savings will be gone. Then you'll have to rely on the town for food — and once the money runs out too, what will you do?"

"Yes, that's right. I'm trying to help the people understand, to think about the children. Before, we could fill a boat with fish in one night. Now, if we catch ten, we're lucky. Something's wrong. Before, fish used to come into the bay to feed on bait fish — but an American company fished out all the bait fish. Now there's nothing left to draw the bigger fish in. I want to run a survey of our waters.

"There's pollution too — boats dumping oil in the bay. How are the corals, from what you've seen?"

"Well — I didn't want to be the one to tell you, but a lot of the coral is bleaching, and quite a bit is dead, covered in algae. To know for certain whether pollution is the cause, we'd need to compare several sites and observe the conditions carefully before drawing any conclusions."

"That's exactly why I want to do a survey. If the fishing boats are responsible, we need to stop them."

"How did the meeting go?"

"It's on hold. A lot of people didn't agree — mostly the ones with nothing to lose, hoping for jobs from the fishing companies. But they won't get any. They just don't understand."

March 17, 2000

We move closer to town. The energy shifts — everyone needs to get ashore. Cash-flow problems; I still don't know how we're going to pay for the diesel.

Baggywrinkle, messages, finances — a whole day spent catching up. Internet madness; the owner of the food store, Babes, has a connection, and everyone books an hour.

All night, kids mess around on a small boat nearby, loud and obnoxious.

I even catch myself, at one point, quietly locating poles and visualizing how I'd handle a fight, if it came to that.

March 18, 2000

Sam and Karen arrive; Qamar picks them up from the airport. Sam comes back loaded with stories — she spent five weeks in Derby, in the savanna country. Claus is happy playing cowboy, at war with wattle scrub and the brutal Kimberley heat.

We all pitch in for our double send-off party — arrivals and departures. White sandy beach on a deserted island, a night shy of the full moon, a few beers, a big fire, friends, the Tambuan dance, music, too much intellectual conversation, swimming, more swimming, dolphin fantasies, Pierre's stories.

Somehow I get swept up in it — a Tambuan trance, hypnotized by the fire.

A dance between fire and water. The waves, gentle caresses, all sense of time dissolving. My body answers to the moon. A sea eagle circles overhead; bats keep returning to the huge tree.

It's not until around two in the morning that real quiet settles in — a check on the weather, a reality check, dropping Pierre off, a quick clean-up with the last of the beer.

March 19, 2000

An easy Sunday, no wake-up call — one of the best additions to our lifestyle, a day of rest.

Every party needs its recovery period. An emotional Sunday, with speeches honoring Sylvia and Daniel — though Karen seems culture-shocked.

She's clearly a career-oriented professional, and from experience, this existentialist ship's-life isn't the easiest place for someone building a career. We'll see how it goes.

We still need to hustle to get out of here in two days.

March 20, 2000

A work day. Eibis organizes the fuel; I get creative solving our cash-flow problem — Qamar lends the ship a thousand dollars for diesel. Messages come in. One of the main questions on everyone's mind: who's going to replace Eibis as captain? I know it isn't me — for several reasons. I'd become too much lord and master aboard; it would go against the whole spirit of the Heraclitus. I also understand the weight of that responsibility. The ultimate responsibility already rests on my shoulders one way or another, but someone else needs to have their heart and soul in the physical running of the ship.

Alison wants to stay — she's been playing the good, agreeable crewmate for a while now, but I know I can't work with her over the long run, especially under pressure.

Orla seems to be doing great.

Still no word from Yvonne. Deeply unsettling. Can it really be this bad?

I put in extra effort today — helping with the mizzen shrouds, cooking dinner, handling communications,

running on my particular brand of on-the-spot energy. Not always visible, but effective.

March 21, 2000

Anchor up, we dock — a tight maneuver, the dock sitting in a dead end with reefs threatening on every side. Fuel's waiting for us. We play a few passes of rugby to loosen our legs, offload trash, take on diesel — four thousand liters, close to fifteen hundred US dollars including docking fees, our biggest single expense. By noon we're back on anchor for another push. Food is aboard by 6:00 p.m. We're ready to head out tomorrow.

A good, energy-filled day — I ride my frustration out through work, pushing myself hard.

March 22, 2000

A quick run into town to say goodbye to Paul at the radio station and pick up a few messages — nothing from Yvonne. I try calling her, no answer. I reach my stepfather instead; my mother's off at the doctor. Mail from Paul, Jacopo, and Gaie, but no time to reply. We raise anchor by 3:00 p.m. First night back at sea — home again.

March 25, 2000

Sailing the south coast of New Ireland, wind in our face, out of the southeast.

A day full of the magic of dolphins and whales. Sunrise spreads across a grand sky. A pod of mesoplodon whales is sighted, then a school of dolphins leaping against the horizon. Two more whales surface to starboard — a cetacean superhighway. Later, sitting on the bow, a group of twelve striped dolphins comes to play at the

bow — a very young calf and its mother surface together for a full ten minutes.

For some reason, killer whales keep coming to mind. I dream of dolphins again and again, the line between reality and fantasy blurring. I feel unsettled myself — loud at times, letting things run a little loose. Quitting smoking is probably not unrelated.

Tonight I get genuinely edgy over the computer — I can't find a spare moment on it, and "arrangements" keep being made for its use that I don't understand and had no part in. I don't want to interfere with the watch schedule, but strange deals keep getting struck. I also feel something like an aversion building toward Alison — she can drive me a little insane.

I'm usually able to stay calm, but lately I find I have to either let things go or risk saying something strange. Group dynamics, challenging in ways I don't fully understand — some chemical undercurrent, maybe a sense of threat, though I couldn't say from what. A quiet contest of egos, for sure. Interesting to observe and feel, even as I notice I could tip into something sharper without meaning to.

Eibis has trouble with a tooth — a wisdom tooth coming in. We may need to stop in Rabaul, though I know he'd rather not.

I have real fun with Priska — she's become a genuine friend. I gave her an art lesson this morning. A full day, somehow.

I also notice myself watching Orla — a strange kind of pull. All my emotions feel more intense lately; dolphins tend to have that effect on me. Is it a reaction to whatever's happening with Yvonne? I don't really know what to do except accept that she wants her space. In the end, there's not much I can do but let life run its course.

After acting class, a swim stop. About thirty feet down, I hear dolphins, or some kind of echolocation — maybe whales. I can only hear it once I dive down. Visibility's over a hundred feet, and the blue keeps calling me in.

March 25, 2000 (continued)

"Whales — pilot whales!" I hear myself shout. Huge blows off the stern. I reel the fishing line in, but they're heading northwest while we're bound southeast — a slight mismatch of destinations. We heave to anyway and watch the parade go by — must be fifty of them, a huge male bringing up the rear of the pod.

Sitting on the bow, I become fixated on the thought of killer whales, scanning the horizon for every bird, ripple, shift in current. I spot a pod of dolphins, but no orca.

During tea time I set a line and try a deep dive. The sea is a deep, dreaming blue — the exact blue from my dreams. I feel free. Then I get aggravated over another argument about the computer — my emotions, already running high, play tricks on me.

I feel strange thinking about Yvonne, especially with Pink Floyd's "Wish You Were Here" playing. I watch some slides, play around with Priska; Orla watches too. I'm starting to like her a great deal — I have to watch myself. Am I about to put myself into another complicated situation? I might need it.

Sunday speeches — I tell the story of my adventure in the pyramids of Egypt: a strange encounter with a guard in a secret passage, rain, a Bedouin family, dancing in the new year, and a sound that still echoes somewhere in my head.

Afterward, a blow sounds off the side of the ship — pitch black, the moon not yet up, we can't see them. I let myself imagine orca again. I'll never know for sure, but I like to believe it was. Makes for a better story, too.

March 26, 2000

We're entering the Solomon Sea, the sky gray, but another whale parade greets us — a pod of pilot whales surfaces to port. We try to follow, Priska at the helm, but they're too far off. My body and mind feel whole. Sitting next to Orla, I feel a strong pull in my chest — I know I like her, but the intensity catches me off guard, and I don't quite know what to make of it. The dynamics on board feel good. Rich stays distant — Alison must be draining something out of him. She's behaving well for now, trying hard, knowing her time here is running short.

We hold a strat command — plans to stop for a few days at Treasury Island. Talk of roles, dry-docking, finances, people, and more.

A wild, emotional ride. I cried my heart out at the top of the mast and felt reborn afterward — I think it opened up space in my chest, and my attraction to Orla is stirring something unexpected in me.

Swim stops. Maybe I'm a little mad, but sweetly so. I'm fully aware of the dreamlike quality of my whole dolphin path, yet the dreams feel so real — a prime motivator for me, if not for humanity generally. My mind swings like a rollercoaster; staying open also means staying unsettled, constantly reshaping itself, even when a new idea seems to fit neatly into an already-formed mold. I like the synergetic feel of the life we're living here — an attempt at a balanced dharma. I've been lucky lately to have real time for something like meditation.

I watch people carefully. Every gesture starts to make sense; words pour out as expressions of repressed desire — not always, but often enough.

The ship sailed twelve hours straight last night, through rain. I wanted so badly to kiss Orla. A real tug-of-war

between mind and body. A single word came in to check the impulse. I let the word out instead.

*Observe the sea,
she teaches,
a clear mind for clear thoughts.
the thoughts, observed.
emotional rescue, boom, boom,
pounding in my chest,
and the voice in my head,
rising up to drive me mad.
can't talk about it,
I'm considered crazy enough as it is,
but the ride of creative passion,
alive,
so good to be alive.
a blessing,
an enchanted land.
I guess love is in the air,
for everyone,
after the storm comes the sun.*

March 28, 2000

Losing track of time again — lost in a world of little water mutants, a baby able to live underwater, raised at sea. The dream of a lunatic. But then, are we not all a crew of lunatics, after all.

A sense of real well-being — comfortable with life, I think. Good to be alive. I keep growing "more and more conscious," to borrow a phrase from 3T, who's been reading a bit too much Ouspensky, though the phrase holds up anyway. The night is starry, and I'm sitting in Nemo's; Orla is reading a fish book. We talk. Somehow I find myself giving her glimpses of my past, the words flowing out on their own. A very particular feeling. I'm almost afraid to say it, but I think I'm falling in love all over again. I don't know exactly what to do with that, and

I don't want to shut down whatever's arising — the courage to actually look at myself, honestly. It's so easy to screen things out, to block an emotional response. Better to observe it without judgment, without letting it rule me.

I've been getting good attention lately; the "lab" sessions feel intense. I find myself right at the edge between waking and sleep, in something like a conscious dream — not all the time, but I recognize the territory now, learning to navigate it. Fascinating ground. I think I'm learning to look more and more inward, searching for the miraculous. The pattern of water still hypnotizes something in me, and I find myself constantly weighing what my heart wants.

Phrases and words travel from mouth to mouth aboard the RV Heraclitus — I'll hear an idea or a sentence I put out three or four months ago, strange how thoughts travel, and even stranger how they get reinterpreted along the way, reshaped to fit whatever belief system picks them up.

March 29, 2000

Close to my dreams, I rest on the bow — we're sailing. Voices keep repeating the same refrains:

"Give me a mark."

"Roger."

"Mark."

"Roger."

I worked on the block for the foresail sheets today — I've mentioned wanting to put more physical effort into the ship, and I've been a little lazy on that front lately. The smell of linseed oil, working the rope, shackles, splices. I remember once being the rigger aboard, and now I can barely remember how to tie a splice.

After acting class we went for a blue-water dive with Eibis, lowering the lead line and descending. Open water is the closest thing I can compare it to — the closest I'll probably ever come to actual space.

At around thirty feet I heard the sound of whales — I was listening for it, since we'd sighted one that afternoon. On the way back up, hundreds of jellyfish brushed against my skin — no wetsuit, a burning sting, like walking through a rosebush and then diving into the sea. Somehow I managed to turn the discomfort into just another strange body sensation.

An evening out — I haven't smoked in eight days, but Eibis found a pack of cigarettes. We sit on the port side and pass it around. Orla is next to me; somehow our shoulders keep touching, and neither of us pulls away. The sea brushes against our skin.

Following the rhythm of the ship and the waves, we stay still for a long while. Then, like something out of a fairy tale, our heads draw closer, hands moving, touching — and we kiss. Like a kind of communion.

What you are seeking is also seeking you.

There's something comical about it too, since people keep wandering past — it won't stay a secret for long, I imagine. But I also find myself back in the realm of the senses. Dolphin-like, I'd say.

March 30, 2000

We're approaching Treasury Island, thirty-five miles out — a frenzy aboard. All the bilges get emptied, the ship gutted once again, everyone moving fast. I cook dinner. A kind of sensual energy is taking hold of me; I feel in love with the world all over again.

Thursday-night reading: Rene Daumal's *Mount Analogue.*

A beautiful night on the bow.

March 31, 2000

I put a lure in — five minutes later a king mackerel takes the hook, but I can't land it, and it slips free back into the sea.

Lush tropical vegetation covers the island, coconut groves everywhere. Brad pilots the ship into the bay. A squall approaches; I'm up at the foremast as the rain moves in like a curtain, wonderful light, a shower straight from the heavens, needle-fine, a real massage of water. A small canoe, a man and child paddling, comes toward us, bringing a leaf piled with fresh mushrooms. The rain stops, the sun breaks through, and half a dozen more canoes head our way — we're not even anchored yet.

Everyone comes to see the black ship.

Of course everyone has something to trade, but really it's more of an excuse to come look at us — I know I'd do the same. All kinds of faces — some warm, some genuinely unsettling, staring in from somewhere else entirely.

With Eibis, I go see Chief John in the village of Falamai. He's old, half-blind, eyes clouded over. We invite him aboard, but he just smiles: "Oh no, no — I'm too old now." That was that. The man who came with us tells Eibis, quietly, to let it go, so we head back. Kids are everywhere along the water's edge.

We know we're not officially cleared in, but at least we've gone through the local protocol.

Lewis Bitiai, our contact, apologizes for arriving so late — meaning it's already dark. He brings two coconut crabs, each wrapped up with a coconut to feed on, a good way to keep them alive for the voyage.

A quick ride before sunset through the coves. A sailing boat is anchored nearby — a BBC film crew shooting World War II wrecks and the reef. Their boat shows the craft of a real seaman, everything sturdy, built to last.

Every kid here has their own canoe, and by five years old, they can all steer, handle, and paddle out on their own.

The anchorage is perfect — black sand, a hundred and twenty feet of water. On the anchor dive with Eibis, I feel genuinely high, a kind of euphoria that isn't narcosis, since it stays with me even once we're working on fixing the rudder.

A great dive — the anchor buried deep, gobies with their shrimp roommates, a sea cucumber feeding, a lone jack cruising past, little fan worms, vents puffing from the sand.

On the hull, two crabs seem to be mating — clouds of a white, silty substance drifting from one of them.

Underwater, working on the rudder, I burst out laughing, bubbles rising with it.

A night out under the stars, in Orla's arms. Tenderness — exactly what we needed.

April 1, 2000

We set off to see Rollen, then meet up with Lewis. Rollen's off at his garden, so with Eibis we scout the area along the tree line, where the forest meets the waves. Small armies of hermit crabs dot the broken coral.

The village sits right on a black-sand beach, a perfect landing spot. A woman carries her trash out to sea — hardly trash as we'd know it, just woven palm leaves and vegetable scraps. No cans, no plastic; plastic here is still a luxury, kept mainly for wrapping tobacco dry inside a bag. We meet up with Eibis to collect our "tour guide,"

Lewis, who greets us with a long handshake and a rotten-toothed grin, endlessly outgoing.

We split the crew into two groups to explore Sterling Island. Eibis, Reka, Priska, Qamar, Orla, Karen, and I take the first route.

We visit what might be the most pristine airstrip on Earth — just a strip cut across the top of a coral atoll, a leftover from the war. A few markers near the forest are the only sign that, once a week, an eight-seat plane still lands here. I find myself more drawn to spiderweb patterns and slender striped lizards than the old war relics.

We take the tender for another short ride, another push through the jungle to a Japanese plane shot down in combat, already overgrown by trees. Nearby, pile after pile of old military equipment — bulldozers, pumps, jeeps. Something almost apocalyptic in the sight of it; I picture Western civilization collapsing and nature reclaiming everything. Man works so hard against the forces of nature — our comfort comes with a steep, sweaty price. We joke around with the old tools and relics; I can't help thinking of **Heart of Darkness**, and Kurtz.

I trail a bit behind again, drawn to the insects — the true marvel of nature's design and evolution. A bright silver-green dragonfly lands nearby; I pick it up, let it tickle my fingers, then hand it to Priska. Suddenly we hear an outboard motor. Lewis quietly says: "Captain, you'd better turn back and go see."

He'd clearly known something was coming, since he himself didn't want to turn back — he looked faintly scared.

A boat pulls up, men in army gear, a machine gun aboard, asking for the captain. Immigration officers.

Eibis rides back with them. I try to reach the ship by radio and realize immediately they're already there.

After some back-and-forth, we learn they're really on the lookout for arms smugglers — there's conflict brewing in Bougainville, between the Solomons and Papua New Guinea.

We'll need to leave tomorrow for the Shortland Islands.

With Eibis and Maik, we cook the coconut crab along with a rainbow runner. I prepare a sauce for the crab, a kind of hollandaise made with the sieved contents of the crab itself — a small masterpiece, my best galley work in a long while.

And the alchemy works — people get "high" off it, or at least pretend to, which is halfway there anyway.

April 2, 2000

6:00 a.m. — we pick up Stanley, who'll travel with us to the Shortland Islands. He's in charge of agriculture. After raising anchor, the first order of business is setting the fishing gear. He asks if we have any onion bags — good for making lures — so we rig one up. Once all the lines are out, I ask if he wants to rest. "No," he says, "we're fishing."

So we sit on the stern, talking about life and fish. He offers me a cigarette. Suddenly a line goes taut; I can't bring in an inch, and then it snaps — no fish, no lure. Start again. We talk on, smoking, trading stories about mermaids, seen, he says, by twenty witnesses; about a pod of thirty-nine whales that beached themselves two weeks ago off Choiseul. We also learn our anchorage back at Treasury was once a worship site for the sea god, Mary.

Not much remains, clearly, of the old beliefs — you won't see a single sailing canoe anymore. But we can still talk

about it. How many of us remember the old folk tales, the stories of where we came from? I spent hours once with my grandmother, listening to stories of her youth — she'd laugh a lot, remembering. I think it did her good, too.

Suddenly, a real bite — a dolphinfish, mahi-mahi. We haul it in together, the excitement clear in both our eyes. It takes half an hour to untangle the line. Another cigarette, then I clean the fish — I like cleaning fish, there's a kind of Zen to it, the right gesture, a small ritual honoring the catch.

The passage into the anchorage is stunning. I'm up at the masthead, my usual spot on arrival, and truly the best seat for taking in the whole scene.

The island, ringed with reef and coconut groves, looks like something off a postcard. And it is paradise.

A sailboat is anchored nearby. Billy, in charge of immigration, greets us. Everyone jumps in the water, trading stories. A beautiful starry night, with a whole concerto of birdsong.

April 3, 2000

Morning starts with paperwork — immigration forms — then off with Billy to meet the chiefs. The first lives in the most peaceful village imaginable, no electricity at all.

On arrival, a woman quickly pulls her sarong up to cover her chest — at least some modesty remains in private. We talk, laugh a little. Everyone here is fascinated by the war relics, treating them like treasure, though to me they're little more than scrap metal — except underwater, where they turn into something like psychedelic sculpture, encrusted in sponge and coral, hosting a whole city's worth of fish: the residents, the occasional visitors, the seasonal crowd. I give the chief a pack of pasta and some rice as a welcome gift.

We head next to see the second chief, busy overseeing the construction of a new school — impressive to watch, the land cleared and worked, all in service of passing along knowledge.

What worries him most, it turns out, is the war relics — something about them seems to hold the community back. War is becoming a tourist attraction now. It reminds me of Cambodia, being asked if I wanted to see the killing fields.

We get permission to snorkel, though not to dive, unless we pay a fee — two hundred and thirty Solomon dollars, which technically they have no right to charge.

We set off with Billy to snorkel, split again into two groups. The reef isn't great — partly because it was stripped to help build the war "relics." The Japanese occupied this island, using local labor, more or less as forced labor. I still find it hard to understand how Japan got drawn into an alliance with Hitler — divide the world, take Europe, take Asia.

The Shortlands were the first island group taken by the Japanese, and remained under their control until the very end of the war. It's ironic that it takes coming all the way out to the Pacific for this history to really land for me. My grandmother told me stories of the war, I've seen the films, but somehow it clicks differently here. In Europe, the entire narrative has narrowed down to the Holocaust and the camps — not that the genocide wasn't atrocious, but everything else recedes into the background. Good strategy, in its way, for the business of peace.

I swim over to the island — spot a huge lobster, but given the local reef politics, decide it's wiser to leave him be. I go down to thirty feet, past the rubble, say hello to a few fish — unicornfish, moorish idols, sweetlips, fusiliers. My breath holds up well; my body settles into the water, and the fish stop treating me as a threat. On the sandy beach

I sit and watch the birds: a small black bird with a bright, shining blue throat and a long curved beak; bright red parrots chasing each other, noisy, from coconut tree to coconut tree. A shining kind of moment. Then back in the water — I didn't want to leave.

April 4, 2000

Waiting for Billy. After reading up on the tensions in Bougainville, I understand a little better the suspicious reception we've gotten in places — we're the black ship that got away, after all.

Priska is doing fine as ever — I can't picture the ship without her anymore, can't picture it without kids at all.

We go once more to see the chief for permission to explore the reef; now he wants to charge us, ten Solomon dollars a head. I answer with a quiet laugh, tell him he must be joking. We talk about everything else under the sun, circling back now and then to the fee. We wait for another chief to finish another meeting, to discuss another angle on the same problem. Gently, plainly, I tell him he simply can't charge us to snorkel. The conversation turns philosophical, and eventually he gives in — there's no real argument he can bring against it. The art of local politics, I suppose. We do agree to pay if we dive the war wrecks specifically.

After more than an hour of negotiating, we're finally free. We head straight for the pass, but the current's too strong, and with four divers we miss the drop I'd wanted. Snorkeling alone, though, I see tuna and Napoleon wrasse. We dive the cut against a two-to-three-knot current, anchoring ourselves to the bottom to watch the fish parade — plenty of sweetlips, which I swim alongside against the current, and an angelfish that comes right up to my face.

We spot two sharks, a silvertip and a blacktip. A dogtooth tuna patrols the edge of the reef. Coral life is sparse, though occasionally you find a lovely combination of soft coral and sponge, worth pausing beside to watch the fish drift by.

We head to a small island — a perfect turquoise landing, but the owner isn't around. We move on. I climb a coconut tree but can't find Billy, so come back down without harvesting anything. A comic, failed attempt at romance on a deserted island — turns out privacy doesn't come easily even out here. Great fun regardless. We troll the line back without luck. I head off with Orla to explore the island, and meet the resident pig, who trots over to sniff us both and then follows along as our unofficial guide. Overhead, the red parrots are going wild — you learn to keep an eye upward in a coconut grove; you never know when the next one's coming down. We meet a man gathering hermit crabs for bait, to catch a bigger fish that will, in turn, become bait for something bigger still — the food chain, revisited.

I have a great talk with Billy — I like him a lot.

An old woman offers Orla a bunch of ripe bananas, still holding a frangipani flower in her other hand. I discover for myself the pull of the frangipani tree — nearly impossible to resist picking the flowers, let alone smelling them.

A boat comes alongside, wanting to trade fish — loaded with emperor, mackerel, coral trout, caught using the simplest, most effective method: a palm-leaf strip weighted with a stone, a hook tucked into the leaf with a lure made from a yellow onion bag, pulled up quickly. Of course, you first have to know where the fish are — that's really the whole trick of fishing — and then how to bring them in. We trade some meat for fish. I ask how well the method works. "Well," they say, "three of us put our lines down, and we caught three fish."

Billy comes by to watch a video, and we hold our Tuesday-night talk on dry-docking and the newsletter. Alison's done a great job on it, but she's playing her own game again — I'll come off as the bad guy if I say anything, but she just can't seem to work as part of the team.

I look into Nemo's just in time to catch the tail end of *Microcosmos* — the best insect footage I've ever seen.

I talk with a man from Fauro Island — reef and fishing, mostly. Only two hundred and fifty people live across an area larger than where we currently are — potentially a wonderful spot, though the local politics seem complicated. We'll have to get used to that; it isn't going away.

April 5, 2000

The second group heads out with Eibis. The ship feels different with half the crew gone. I catch up on finances, work out our budget for the next few months, and put together an information package.

Brad gets thoroughly caught up in dry-dock planning, unable to let it go — working hard, and bringing others along with him.

A great chat with Brenda. Karen seems a bit off — I don't think I've given her enough credit as a scientist, and she has real trouble getting her hands dirty; or maybe it's simply a sense of humor I haven't caught onto yet. On the whole, the structure holds together well.

We host the quarantine officer — we need to leave tomorrow for Gizo, and customs is waiting on us. Then I go on an anchor dive with Orla, the anchor mostly an excuse to get underwater — a playful, sensual dive, the two of us like kids down there. Not much else to see besides a few giant gobies and sea worms. A lovely dive all the same.

We spend the evening watching a movie on deck — the Heraclitus turned traveling theater. Tonight's feature: *Dances with Wolves.* Billy, his family and friends, and the crew — one happy family.

April 6, 2000

With Eibis, we visit the head of police, talking about the crisis in Bougainville — no real official presence here since '88, more of an outpost than anything. The police clear us to leave at 3:00 p.m., leaving just enough time to dive the seaplane wrecks.

We pick up a guide from the village and snorkel the first wreck — overgrown with coral, sponges, and invertebrate life, fish everywhere. Then we head to dive in the middle of the channel, where a plane rests in thirty feet of water on a sandy bottom. Garden eels ring the whole wreck; I love staying motionless and watching them peek from their holes. Under the cockpit, fish swim upside down. Small gobies and their shrimp partners eye the divers warily. A scorpionfish hides somewhere in the wreckage.

We move on to two more planes lying side by side — again, spectacular fish life. Our guide spears a sweetlip.

But the best dive is the last, a wreck thick with soft coral, schools of glassfish drifting through. Inside the plane's structure, nature has completely reclaimed the space — a kaleidoscope of vibrant blue, red, and yellow, a true work of art, a living sculpture refined by time. The fish have nowhere to flee, so you can watch them at leisure. I spot a few species I don't recognize at all, and wish I'd had a camera. I'm entranced, overwhelmed by the beauty — the plane's structure seems to frame and highlight every coral colony, light pouring through them, the current keeping visibility crystal clear. I don't want to leave. We rush to find Luke, the local chief, and I pay him fifty US dollars for all of us, say our goodbyes, and

race back to base so the second team can dive the wrecks too.

On board, I push the crew to get the ship shipshape, and by 1:00 p.m. we're ready to sail.

Brad pilots us out; we raise sail and hook a fish. I start making lures from the garlic bags — they actually work. We lose a dolphinfish off the line. No sushi tonight.

My leg has turned into a nightmare — swollen, weeping pus, a red line tracking up toward my knee. Time to do something about it fast. I start antibiotics, and know I won't be getting wet for a few days. It hurts badly enough that I miss both lab and acting class. Orla keeps me sane through it.

A nice comments-and-observations night — I steer the conversation toward the wrecks, and the war.

April 7, 2000

Wind in our sails, no engine, and a spectacular sunrise. We'll reach Gizo tomorrow. I keep quiet, my leg still a serious mess — in the old days, people used to die from infections like this. I find myself deep in bandages and the first-aid kit. A small argument with Alison.

We catch a small bonito. I keep working on the fishing gear. Eibis, Reka, and Priska are leaving in two weeks — a realization that's starting to sink in.

April 8, 2000

Up for sunrise, in Orla's arms. A pod of dolphins nearby — one leaps twelve times in a row, perfectly synchronized. Magic is the closest word I have for a moment like that. Then three more perfect leaps. They follow our course a while before disappearing. Fish jump everywhere, thousands of seabirds join in, but our lines stay untouched.

We enter Gizo Harbor. I take the position from the mast, as always — addicted to the height, but also the best vantage point for surveying the operation. The crow, the eagle's eye. The island is fringed with reef.

We're suddenly, all too soon, back in civilization — motorboats racing around. It's Saturday, and the customs office is closed for the weekend; for a fee, of course, they could clear us in today anyway. We're at least cleared through immigration, and everyone heads ashore.

Anchor down — the first time I don't dive it myself.

Everyone rushes ashore for a first night out in port. I volunteer to stay behind as guard — happily so, a peaceful evening. I make it to shore just long enough to buy a pack of cigarettes, then head back.

Most of them come back drunk, but my head stays full of stars and the wisdom of the sea.

We've arrived in the Solomons, after three months. Bali feels like a different lifetime.

Chapter Three

Gizo, Solomon Islands

April 9, 2000

Gizo is the main settlement in the New Georgia group of islands in the Solomons. The town has a quiet, peaceful vibe — very relaxed. The stores blast reggae music all day long. I decide to stay on board, loaded up with antibiotics — an infection in my leg has started to swell, white pus coming out, a volcano in eruption.

The show comes to the ship anyway. Woodcarvers from neighboring islands try to sell their wares — delicate carvings in kerosene wood or rosewood, traditional war-canoe figureheads, dolphins, sharks, all inlaid with nautilus shell. We meet Dani, the dive operator — an outgoing American from Florida who's spent fifteen years here. He came as a backpacker, realized he'd reached paradise, and stayed. He shows us the dive sites, and we strike a deal: we'll use his operation to dive the famous wreck, the Toa Maru, and in exchange we can dive the surrounding area freely. The islands east of Gizo are unclaimed, requiring no permit or fees. He invites Priska to spend the night with his eleven-year-old daughter — they become instant friends.

Another man comes by to talk about Kolombangara, his island, and possibly organizing a trip there — he's looking for funds for his community. It sits close to the "volcano island" itself. All the pieces of the puzzle come together. I write up a plan for our stay here: science for the first three weeks, and the passing of the captain's hat. Eibis, Reka, and Priska leave next Tuesday. I'll carry the political-captain role, with Brad as sea captain for maneuvers and shipboard life, under my close supervision.

With Eibis, Reka, and Orla, we head out for a ride. It's poured rain all day, but we go anyway. I still can't get in the water, so I try fishing instead — without success. A nice Sunday-night speeches session.

April 10, 2000

Strong wind picks up during the night, twenty-five knots — radar checks, close watch, heavy rain. Attention stays on the elements and the ship. The deck gets a good wash.

Communication madness in the morning — the Telikom office provides internet access, and on board we have to organize a schedule so everyone can get their turn; most of us are internet-starved. Meanwhile I head to the bank to try to withdraw money, using Claus's name, but when they ask for a passport I have to invent an immigration story on the spot. Now the girl at the counter greets me as "Claus Tober." We have no cash on hand, so I send an urgent message to headquarters in Santa Fe.

Back on board, I meet Jonah, a wood carver — I find myself craving a canoe. We talk custom and village life; his carving is flawless, full of elegance. A whole army of woodcarvers boards the ship — the deck turns into a museum.

I write up our plan: science, volcano climbing, exploring the Diamond Narrows — the narrow passage between New Georgia and Kolombangara — fuel stops in Noro, then back to Gizo for the yacht race, with a possible trip to Simbo Island.

I present the new roles and schedule at Strat: I'll be political captain, Brad handling all captain's duties day to day, with me simply reserving the right to step in when necessary. Eibis and I both feel good about the decision.

With Brad, we head out scouting for surf. I mind the boat through huge swells while he rides. A fish snaps my trolling line. Orla snorkels. A great cast of color plays over the waves — a kind of meditation, contemplating light gone divine.

Back on board, I stay on guard, cooking sushi and cheese toast.

The rest of the crew is out in town — party, beers, and cheers.

April 11, 2000

Angel Brenda comes to me and hands me an envelope — she'd withdrawn money from the bank yesterday. I'd forgotten she still owed the ship her fees. It comes as a blessing; I hadn't known how we'd pay the customs fees, let alone a new starter battery, our latest engineering headache — the engine's grown temperamental about starting. She wanted something new, apart from a little attention. All is well.

We decide to head to Kennedy Island, formerly Kasolo — the story goes that a future US president, John F. Kennedy, after his boat PT-109 was struck by Japanese soldiers, swam ashore here and was rescued six days later, becoming a war hero.

A canoe drifts past the ship, empty — Sam rescues it, and we claim it as our own. Jonah laughs: "Now you've got a free canoe from the Solomons." The story is that someone tried to break into one of the yachts anchored here, jumped overboard, and lost their canoe in the process — so we know no one will come to claim it. Jonah had been planning to carve us one anyway.

We shipshape the ship for tomorrow's departure. I call for a night out — last chance for a beer in town, or a quiet evening on deck.

Our pet gecko is still doing fine — officially a crew member now, whose duty is to sing his gecko songs each evening. Long way from home in Bali, he often visits our lab circle; I think he's figured out by now that we're not moving anytime soon.

Fish are jumping everywhere around the ship, bonitos, the sea boiling with them. I jump in the small boat and troll a line right in front of their faces — they refuse to bite. I even bought new hooks at the market today, and spent time making lures from old onion bags. Determined to catch fish — catching your own, another essential step toward our sea-people vision. I fail spectacularly. Tomorrow's another day.

April 12, 2000

A quick email sent out, a visit to immigration and the port authorities — officially captain, in the eyes of the law.

Big groupers are for sale at the market, usually shipped straight off to Hong Kong or Japan from elsewhere in the region. The fishing here is still good — or at least the Japanese haven't found their niche yet. The war might still be something of a blessing for the fish.

We raise anchor at 11:00, off to Kennedy Island. I take my usual position atop the mast; Brad pilots us out, in charge of the maneuver. He does well — sharp decisions, no confusion in his orders — but at one point he leans on the chart over the course and information called down from the mast, and we pass over a reef. Deep enough to be safe, but unnecessary, with miles of open blue water all around us.

We enter a wide, deep blue, scenic channel, dark clouds threatening in the background.

I shoot postcard-worthy photos, entranced by the quality of the light.

We anchor right in front of a Gilbertese village, three cables off the island of Mbambanga. A quick coordinated effort from the whole crew — lower the boat, rig the tarp, set the dive gear — and we split into two groups for a snorkel.

The anchor digs into soft sand. Perfect.

A superb approach to a sandy beach on Kennedy Island — the coral comes right up to the shore, with a deep drop-off less than ten meters out. Clouds of fish, one- to two-meter groupers — the last time I remember seeing them that size was in the Maldives. Schools of unicornfish, whitetip sharks, silvertip sharks, barracuda, and a whole range of commercially valuable species.

I circle the island's reefs in an hour, ecstatic — I haven't been in the water in five days, thanks to my leg. It's healing well now. Once again the evening light glorifies the landscape, the volcano draped in silky cloud, the ship a silhouette between two islands — the perfect image.

Tonight Priska hosts an art show aboard the ship — everyone creates something, and I get it all on video. It's also Sam's birthday — happy birthday song, and the evening ends with dancing on deck. A bottle opens — our first glass of wine since Bali. The whole crew gets into it, one of those magic evenings, though I fail to convert the crowd to seventies disco, met with an uproar of complaints from Kirsten.

A superb night watch, where I work on future plans — the dream of a cetacean nation, and the sea-people tribe.

April 13, 2000

An early-morning dive — the sun just piercing through the clouds, seagulls following us to the site. We drop onto a wall, and as soon as we descend, three sharks come to inspect us — a silvertip passes close, several times. We cut across a school of huge barracuda, more

sharks. A stretch of the wall holds a garden of black coral. Fish everywhere — a school of mackerel appears, a lone dogtooth tuna patrols the edge, sweetlips and snappers, black snapper, clouds of anthias.

But everywhere, bleached coral meets the eye — over thirty percent of it, and recent. It doesn't recover; algae colonizes it almost immediately. It seems to be becoming a worldwide problem — coral picking up some stress signal from the planet and bleaching in response. I'm not personally convinced rising temperature is the whole story. It could be something more like a disease spreading, or the rise of algae in the water, or sea level slowly affecting how light penetrates. Clearly a global problem. Consider that man has wiped out ninety-three percent of the world's whale population — a simple calculation shows a measurable difference even at planetary scale. Most top predators are fished out now. Sea cucumbers, which I like to call the reef's vacuum cleaners, are gone. Here, and in PNG, we can hardly blame local human impact — too few people, no real industrial complex doing damage. So what is it? A vital question. The reefs aren't recovering. Only in a few places, under strong monitoring, do they stand any real chance — and only against direct human impact. The planetary-scale changes, our collective madness, are another matter entirely.

It's easy to imagine an apocalyptic future for the reefs — they're going. We still find great spots, sure, but the dive industry's whole approach is misleading — it takes years of scouting an area to find decent sites, and by the time divers show up, they're shown the best of it and leave thinking everything's fine. Films mislead too — too many beautiful images, too little of the quiet horror of mass die-off. Though I can't really blame anyone for that; I don't especially want to sit through a horror movie myself.

Back from the dive, I plan the next three days — scouting and diving. Mornings for scout/snorkel, two scheduled dives each afternoon.

Meanwhile I need to coordinate with Eibis, Brad, and Rich on the ship's operations.

People from the village come to visit and invite us ashore. A young man has tattoos across his face; they're light-skinned, with beautiful features.

A dive on the outer wall, straight out from the ship — I bring the camera for the first time in weeks. We drop to a hundred feet; a shark circles me twice and passes just above my head. Again, so much of the coral is bleached. We gradually move up — a huge two-meter Napoleon wrasse swims close to the surface. More sharks. The light dims — a rainstorm above us, waves starting to form, the rain drumming into the sea. Two meters below the surface I film this grand spectacle. An eagle ray passes by. Dive, dive, dive — that's the magic. Not diving — that's the tragedy.

I tend the next dive, spending an hour up and down. My breath holds for a minute and a half; down to thirty feet, I hook myself to a rock and watch the fish parade go by.

Holding your breath changes how you perceive color — everything more vibrant, a quality I don't get diving with tanks.

With Eibis, we introduce ourselves to the village chief — the people are striking. In the communal house we're seated on woven palm mats, and invited to that evening's rehearsal of their traditional dance, in preparation for a competition the following Monday.

We rush back to the ship to rework the schedule, and the harder task — finding guards for tonight. I propose that whoever can't go tonight gets priority for Monday's celebration instead.

I hadn't expected to create such tension. A few minutes ago we were all simply enjoying paradise, and suddenly sharp comments start flying — a lot of spite. Poor humanity. I hold firm. Emotions on full display.

I end up in a small argument with Rich, the first time ever — his reaction is so sharp that, for the first time, I sense some real animosity toward me. Good to know. Alison talks nonsense about how it might rain tonight, or the dancers won't be as good. My stomach knots. Lesson learned, I suppose — I'll handle these things more quietly from now on, and go with fewer people.

We head to the village by 8:00 p.m. All the kids are waiting on the shore for us; we've brought gasoline as a gift. We sit in a row and the show begins — the unity of the community is beautiful to watch, everyone taking part in one way or another. The men slap a wooden table for rhythm, and the voices are extraordinary, perfect harmony — we all fall into a kind of trance. A magical show, even as a rehearsal without full costume — there's an intimacy in that, not a tourist performance at all.

The Gilbertese keep their traditions alive, living somewhat apart from the rest of the Solomon Islanders, but I sense real kindness in them — peace in their voices and gestures, beautiful faces, strong bodies in the girls. My feet keep tapping the rhythm, my hands can't stop clapping, and I'm smiling for most of the evening — two hours of it. Afterward we introduce ourselves, and I commit to an evening on Wednesday, a small performance of our own in exchange. They didn't ask for money, but I'll put together a slideshow for them. We come back fully blessed, with a real feel for the Pacific — I understand now why Gauguin, and so many others, never wanted to leave. They know how to live.

I couldn't help thinking of our own theater, our own small sea-culture, in comparison.

April 14, 2000

Out on a scouting trip, heading to the western islands. A flat calm day, the reef clearly visible from the surface. As soon as we drop, I shoot down — a seamount sixty feet down, dropping to eighty. I play with an eagle ray, unafraid; another joins it, and they circle together before each heads off in its own direction. A turtle rests on the mound. A school of juvenile barracuda, a whitetip patrolling the reef, coming in close.

Along the island, men wade in the water, splashing with sticks, driving fish toward a net stretched across the other end of the reef flat. Small boys spear the ones they want. We drop anchor near an island — the snorkeling is superb, sharks, schools of fish, clouds of anthias in the shallows, and, again, perfect visibility, even after rain.

We head back satisfied.

A dive on our "house reef" is a sad one — all the coral there is dying. Poor visibility adds to the sadness. I end up tending the boat with Orla to help settle my mood. The reef feels like it's crying out for help, and for now all I can do is watch. Most bleached coral won't recover; algae takes over almost immediately.

Comments and observations tonight center on the state of the reef, with every possible theory about the cause of the bleaching.

April 15, 2000

Saturday acting class, rehearsing for our upcoming performance on the island. We head out for a dive at Kennedy Island — I film the bleaching. Brenda, my buddy, handles a great dive; I get close-ups, and a nice shot of a bumphead parrotfish crunching on a coral head.

It's obvious this area is going to suffer. Mixed feelings — the diving itself is spectacular, so attention splits: the mind recording everything, the emotions locked onto a fuller awareness of the ecosystem. I am in love with fish.

Coming back from the dive, two bottlenose dolphins surface a few meters from the boat, checking us out. A few of us slip into the water but stay near the boat; the dolphins hold at a safe distance. We follow their course for a while, then head back to the ship, elated.

I tend the last dive of the day — one of my best so far, my breath fully in sync. I drop to a hundred feet and hook myself to a dead coral to watch the show — without bubbles, fish come right up to my face. I swim through a school of giant barracuda, spot two whitetips, a turtle, clouds of fish. I cover a wide stretch of reef, feeling completely at home.

The moon rises, two rainbows appear over the volcano, and the light drapes the whole landscape in gold.

In the evening Brad calls a meeting — he feels we shouldn't move the ship. But Eibis and I both feel strongly that more practice is needed, and the crew could use a break ashore.

April 16, 2000

We move the ship, Brad "in charge." The anchor chain's caught on a fluke; Eibis dives to clear it. We raise it and take the narrow passage to Gizo — Brad and Rich went out early to review the maneuver. I watch each decision carefully, positioning myself for the best view. The stations feel a little rough — putting Alison in charge of the bow was a mistake — but we learn from it.

The passage itself is exciting, narrow, the current running against us, but we clear it easily. We anchor back in front of the Gizo market.

We meet up with Dani — we're diving the wreck tomorrow.

I go with Orla for a snorkel. The current nearly sweeps us out to sea, so we choose a protected bay instead and watch the fish: a school of cornetfish over the seagrass, pipefish on dead coral, the cutest clownfish I've ever seen, a whitetip cruising by, cardinalfish hiding in the staghorn coral.

Great Sunday speeches, everyone getting emotional. Eibis gets a real confidence boost, well deserved — he's leaving with solid foundations laid. He and Qamar and Priska play out a little skit, playing "Barbie girls."

After dinner we empty the last of the "President of Guyana" bottle of rum, squeezing out the final drops.

April 17, 2000

Money's in the bank — no worries for the next few months. The creative cash-flow scrambling can rest for a while. We set out for the wreck dive.

We drop to a hundred and twenty feet — the ship lies on its side. We penetrate the wreck to see old sake bottles still sitting inside. Fifty-five years ago the ship was hit by a torpedo and sank heading for shore. A perfect wreck, but the truly impressive sight is the coral growth — I realize then that if you simply leave a reef alone, it can recover. In less than a human lifetime, a whole ecosystem has formed here, huge plate corals and staghorn thickets, every resident of a healthy reef present.

We take lunch on the island, watching birds and snorkeling the reef edge — huge formations of coral like cathedral spires, resting in the sand.

The second dive is on a bommie they call Hot Spot. Fish life here is like nowhere else — a mound covered a

hundred percent in hard coral, fluorescent pink anemones dotting the reef. I count seven humphead wrasse on that dive alone, jacks, barracuda. On the sand flats at ninety feet, whitetips rest on the bottom, titan triggerfish everywhere. I wander into one's territory and it strikes at my head — I'll probably carry a scar there now. But I want more, and like a matador in the arena, I move in closer. The fish attacks the camera a few times, circles around looking for another opening, aggressive, fearless, chasing every other fish out of the area.

Lionfish drift out, schools of unicornfish, and a genuinely healthy reef — less bleaching here than anywhere else so far. I drop down to film a shark, edging into decompression, but happily spend twenty minutes in the shallows afterward. One of the best dives of my life — the kind that gives you hope.

We all come back energized. Rain and wind pick up, but nobody cares.

We're partying tonight — Sam's organized a buffet, and we even get to dance. The table gets cleared and I salsa with Priska.

Back on board, Eibis and I raid Ferdi's stash. A great night, the moon full. At sunset a rainbow pattern spread across the clouds; Eibis got photos with all the girls on board.

April 18, 2000

The boat to Honiara never showed up, so Eibis will fly instead. I pick up the video footage in town, collect money from the bank, have tea with Eibis and Reka, organize the fuel, pay Dani for the dives, work through finances, keeping my eyes wide open the whole time. I feel the ship around me like a miraculous sandwich I'm caught in the middle of. Orla is a blessing.

I have time to give Eibis some material to show around, copy a tape, and drop him at the airport — quick check-ins here and there, a quick kiss, a quick word.

Three good friends depart — the kind where you don't need to say much, so much already understood in a look. We see each other clearly. Big hugs.

Tonight we prepare the ship, work on our theater piece, and head back to the water. Reefs, I know you're calling us. Messages from Gaie, Lazer, and Johnny feel like a sign — the RVH2 project starting to feel real. I sense Gaie's pull back toward the ocean. My job now will be to guide them underwater, so they can witness firsthand what's happening. Experience — this is the reality.

Expediting, shipshaping, meetings — getting ready for tomorrow's departure. In the evening we go over our theater schedule for tomorrow's performance in the village at Mbambanga. Rest under a moon nearly full.

April 19, 2000

Last messages sent out. A quick strat meeting to review our situation, and a nervous Brad — I'm glad he is. He takes the small boat out with Rich to scout the maneuver. Departure meeting. Here we go. I climb to the top of the mast to "pilot." As we exit the harbor, a pod of spinner dolphins comes to greet us. We navigate carefully around shallow patches even where we know there's clearance, but before entering the channel between Olasana and Naru islands, the wind picks up. I don't like the look of a menacing cloud settling over the volcano — you can watch it rolling down the slopes. I shout: "I don't like it." Brad and I agree to head back out to sea and wait.

Half an hour later the cloud passes and we complete the maneuver. All goes well — we anchor safely, take an

hour-and-a-half break, then start preparing for the evening.

We set off at 7:00 p.m., loaded with gear and the Tambuan up on the bow. I meet the chief, and we move to the communal area to set up, pausing after a few minutes for the prayer — everyone here is Christian.

A formal introduction with the whole community, and we're crowned with flowers — three girls, dressed for the occasion, dance and place scented frangipani blossoms on our heads. We agree to start with our performance.

First slides, then the sail dance, a four-elements piece — fire, air, earth, water — with more slides to finish.

Their performance takes my breath away, mainly for their singing — hands slapping rhythm on the wooden table, kids imitating from the corner, everyone giving everything they have. The costumes are more elaborate than last time. We sit in a smiling trance the whole time; I record a bit of it, careful not to move too much and break the spell.

Before we leave, they ask us to sing a song, and we make fools of ourselves — none of us can sing at all. Plenty of laughter, and we head back under the full moon.

We broadcast the highlights over the radio, for the guards left aboard.

April 20, 2000

A late wake-up to recover. I cook breakfast, and we spend the morning setting up — the beagle lowered, dive gear rigged, small-boat training underway. Rich and the whole crew sit on deck with a whiteboard for a full session on small-boat operations: emergency procedures, tender training, radio communication, engine troubleshooting.

Two kids from the village come by with three lobsters in their canoe.

So while everyone's wrapped up in small-boat theory, the lobsters cook on the stove — pasta with lobster for lunch.

Science training in the afternoon: "Vitareef, Vitareef." I sit quiet, not wanting to interfere with what feels like an internal reorganization of power — fascinating to watch. I just need to stay alert and let it settle on its own.

A dive around 6:00 p.m. on the wall at One Eye Rabbit. The sun setting, huge formations of cabbage coral thick with anthias and sergeant majors. A humphead parrotfish crunches on coral. The light turns mystical, fields of staghorn along the reef crest. This time I try not to fixate on the bleaching. Orla and I spot a strange fish, half pipefish, half needlefish, striped black and white. A superb sky greets us back on the surface.

During dinner the moon rises, fire-orange, and everyone falls quiet.

*Glorious moon,
before they forgot about you,
when there was no other light to free the night,
ténèbres,
once a month you were conquered,
by a white lady,
lady moon.
I'm gonna be a shark today.
Oh no, please, be a turtle.
Thursday night, Mount Analogue, chapter three.
the road less traveled,
is the one man thinks impossible.
the road almost not traveled,
is the one man cannot think.
the road never traveled,
is the future.*

*a sailboat is a love affair with the wind and the
sea,
you can't know where you'll land,
the elements,
the masters,
like a love affair,
you do not control,
you ride,
you ride until the end of your dreams,
or the beginning of a new door,
behind the door,
another door,
until you realize there are no doors,
you made those doors yourself.*

April 21, 2000

A meeting on dive procedure, first aid, and dive physics in the morning — the usual pattern of interruptions, drowning in details.

I explain the effects of nitrogen narcosis, clearing up some confusion Alison's talk had left in everyone's mind — a session full of insight into how a particular kind of mind operates.

I spend the afternoon cataloging video footage — memories of Bali, the voyage so far. We fill air bottles and get ready for a late-afternoon dive.

With Brad, Brenda, Orla, and Sam, we head for the "magic tree."

Once upon a time there was a seed on an island. The other trees knew this one was destined to become something majestic, so they conspired to have a bird carry the seed away. But the bird choked, and dropped the seed on a small outcrop of reef instead. It grew there anyway, and became home to a pair of sea eagles —

every evening it catches the last of the sun, standing like a monument to nature, ringed by deep blue sea.

A waterspout is sighted — you can clearly see the water being drawn up into the cloud, another small miracle of nature. We sit in the small boat, nearly holding our breath in contemplation.

We anchor near the tree and dive the drop-off — a steep wall thick with sea fans, soft coral, black coral. A seven-foot shark cruises through at thirty feet. Two huge eagle rays glide past. Fish everywhere — jacks, tuna, mackerel. On a wall like this, the fish have nowhere to hide, so they let you approach closer than usual. More sharks pass. The reef top, riotously colorful, seems to hold every species imaginable — a bustling, city-like feeling. A big porcupinefish drifts over to inspect us with its huge round eyes.

We swim to the magic tree, snorkeling the sandy bottom around it — gliding like a dolphin, my breath holding well. By now the light is beyond words, magical hues, the stuff of sea-people dreams.

Comments and observations — I feel almost like I'm in kindergarten at times. Brad and I have a good talk on the stern afterward.

Everyone fights for their own territory; the sense of shared space isn't always well respected — resistance, and an obvious dependency on the leader. Brad's doing well with it.

April 22, 2000

Acting class in the morning — poetry, music, dance. Karen and Maik aren't really present, energy lagging. A discussion follows; I'm nearly ready to shake things up a little. It's ironic, sitting in one of the most magical spots on the planet while the crew gets tangled in petty emotional games. A long way still to go.

The village chief visits to talk about the upcoming competition.

*oh, the black ship that got away,
let the song of the wind play with the rigging,
a solo of fragrant, linseed-oiled blocks,
a rope keeping the tempo on the mast,
whistling through the booms,
and our natural voices filling the night.
cry, sky, cry,
and let your sweet tears wash
the salt from my oceanic skin.*

A gray sky allows for some rest — the mind drifting into space, dreams and sleep. Eating, a swim. Kids from the village come by to play, jumping off the bow. I show them some video — laughter, tender moments, a sweet sunset.

We cook the tuna, eat the tuna. Fish, oh fish — another day gone, in the magic of our ship.

An argument in the command room, about acting class — a tendency to feed a problem instead of letting it go.

The wind picks up during the night, the daydream over, attention shifting to the chain and the radar.

All senses on alert — telling me where everyone is, what everyone's doing. I lie there, an active observer, ready at the slightest sign of trouble.

April 23, 2000

First time waking at 10:00. Qamar bakes Danish rolls; my impatience earns me a burned lip. Easter Sunday. In the early afternoon, once the sky clears, a dive — a sweet rain shower along the way, water collected for later.

We drop at the edge of the reef, into the pass. I lead. The slope is wild, soft coral swaying in the current. I go down to a hundred feet and stay there, watching the greatest show on earth — an eagle ray glides lazily with the

current, a school of over a thousand small barracuda whirls through the pass, and just above them, eight huge king barracuda wait for prey. Six sharks cruise by in the distance. Fusiliers so dense I can't see through to the other side. A school of huge jacks circles me in a wild underwater dance, a ballet of aquatic blue. Grouper, sweetlips, everything oversized. The biggest coral trout I've ever seen checks me out. I'm in a magic spot — you know it when you're in it, the right time, the right place. The current is fierce; we hold onto dead coral outcrops, swimming alongside clouds of anthias and chromis, all of us swaying together in harmony.

Sunday tea, and the ship goes quiet — a stillness that never quite happens any other time. I fall asleep. A dive goes in around 5:30 that wasn't properly cleared, and I get genuinely upset — I gather everyone involved for a minute to clarify the procedure, then a superb Sunday dinner follows.

I "preach" to the ship — prophet's day, Jesus risen from the dead, if I remember right.

I plan the next day: science in the morning, cultural time in the afternoon — the islanders have their own competition going on today and asked us for another small performance. I spend some time on the bow playing flute, didgeridoo, and drums under the moonlight. Orla comes for a kiss. Sweet bliss.

Still, I find myself tormented over Yvonne. Sad and strange, but the truth is she's on a different path than mine right now. I'm a kind of warrior — my quest is a kind of utopia, saving what I can of the ocean, while also taking in as much as possible of what nature offers.

April 24, 2000

*fly, eagle ray, fly,
current flowing by,*

*a dance of jacks and man,
choreographed by nature's will,
I let the fluid mind go,
space, dream of space,
a liquid rite of passage.
diving in the storm,
you can hear the rain,
hitting hard on the doorway.
right down here below,
the waves run the flow,
and my mind is on the go.
diving in the storm,
a whirlpool in the glow,
and all the fish will know,
while the light is getting low,
and my mind is on the go.*

I spend the morning with slides, instruments, and poetry for our upcoming event.

Around noon I paddle one of the kids' canoes, while he's busy jumping off our bow.

By 1:30 we all pile onto the small boat for the competition day. The visiting village sits on one side, taking turns to sing, giving everything they have — elaborate costumes, and I film part of the day, though the light isn't great, so I focus on hands and facial expressions. We're each handed a coconut to drink. The songs are full of emotion — a real competition, each side giving its best, the hierarchy carefully structured, each chief rising in turn to speak. I stand to explain what we'll do tonight.

In the evening we perform our piece — slides, music, dance. The Tambuan is a hit, drawing everyone's attention. Afterward we rig up the TV so they can watch themselves on screen — hysterical laughter, they love it, it comes so naturally to them. There's a real peace in their faces; we look almost mean and bored by

comparison, and I suppose some of us are, since even in this idyllic setting, people manage to find things to argue about. Tired but full, I fall asleep under the clearest sky we've seen here yet — stars everywhere, and a rising moon to crown the day.

April 25, 2000

A dive in the morning — I film gobies and their shrimp partners, follow a clown triggerfish, and wait for garden eels to peek from their holes. The site is healthy, less bleaching than other reefs we've seen here, though for our study it might give a misleadingly rosy picture of the area.

Back for strat — a real push on procedures, tightening things up now for more freedom later, especially around diving. Alison, almost nine months aboard, still doesn't tend a dive properly, and argues constantly with Rich. Everyone seems to have a tendency to bicker lately, and over lunch you can hear the echoes of odd little conflicts around the ship. Paradise is here, mostly on the inside, so I practice a kind of Zen listening — hearing everything, interfering as little as possible. But there's no natural conductor of the ship's rhythm, and I need to keep it moving. All in all, things are okay — we're on the right track.

In the afternoon I set up the video lighting, ballast it, and head off with Rich and Maik to the "Lippitsch Wall" — I claim that site as mine. As soon as we drop in, two huge eagle rays pass within two meters of us. A school of jacks circles. Barracuda hover above, a reef shark makes a pass. Sweetlips, groupers, that whole fan-covered wall. I test the lights, different angles and strengths, filter and no filter. A school of big-eye fish, large emperor. Everything imaginable passes in front of our eyes, a nonstop show — five giant sweetlips cruising the thirty-foot mark, the reef top thick with every species in the

book. I come back to the boat down to two hundred psi, and would have sucked the tank dry given the chance. I just didn't want to leave.

I cooked pizza, pasta with lobster sauce, and a mustard-cucumber salad. The girls put on a skit for Maik's birthday, all playing exaggerated versions of "conscious movement" — sound bites, German accents, tanned muscular arms. The village invites us to another dance party that night, this time modern dance rather than traditional — so Maik and the girls dance the groove with the tanned local Gilbertese, night after night. The ship feels peaceful at last.

The last three days have carried a bickering mood — too many women aboard, we joke, though it's part of the real problem. Some energy is going unfulfilled, and it finds a way out. A rainstorm, and a light breeze, send me off to sleep.

April 26, 2000

A good lab session, my attention fully present. We set out for a transect, taking until 2:00 p.m. to finish it — a new team, and the efficiency isn't there yet, everything about the rhythm. I snorkel while they identify coral species, and find another busy spot — bumpy terrain, but clear visibility, no current. Hard work; we come back satisfied.

Brad wants to go scout Ringgi Cove, where we plan to head once Gaie and Lazer arrive — eight miles off. I suggest he plan a proper expedition next week with more people, not just Rich and himself; it's far, and resource-heavy, though we do have a detailed chart of the area. But if seeing it firsthand would give him more confidence, I want to support that.

I'm planning to spend Saturday night on Kennedy Island with Orla — waking up to birdsong and a dip in the ocean, no voice complaining about some small detail.

One of the best dives yet, late afternoon on the pass near the magic tree. We drop in and are greeted by a courtship display of unicornfish — the males extending their dorsal fins, dancing around the females. Then a parade of jacks, coming in to provoke. We drop to a hundred and twenty feet to find whitetips, blacktips, and gray reef sharks. A few barracuda hover near the bottom.

A group of jacks harasses a shark.

April 27, 2000

A dive in the morning where I fall into a trance over the "tit anemone" formations, getting a real handle on the lighting — the images turn out gorgeous, very spacious. Meanwhile the crew is busy preparing messages to send out that afternoon. At strat we decide on a weekly town trip, for fresh supplies and communication.

Rich and Alison spend the night on Kennedy. Thursday night on *Mount Analogue.*

*without maintenance, man-made universes fall
back into nature's web.
in the seeker's mind,
truth, a glimpse of truth, is the paradigm,
it reveals itself only to a true mind, heart, and
spirit,
and courage,
it lives on the edge.*

April 28, 2000

We leave early morning for a transect, laid out on a slope with big boulders — it takes nearly four hours to complete. A new team, and half the science crew is unwell — Sam's emotionally unsteady, Kirsten has a cold — so it's Qamar, Alison, and me doing the work.

Visibility is fair. I snorkel between sections, exploring a blue hole and making it to the drop-off — plenty of fish, and a strong current.

A trip into town for the Friday disco night. I stay on guard with Orla, Qamar, Brenda, and Karen, and we watch the first half of *South Pacific*, the fifties classic.

The rest of the crew stumbles back drunk around 2 a.m. — a good night out for them.

April 29, 2000

Saturday acting class — Brad gives a beautiful talk, though he's playing the seductive guru a little too much lately. Still, the talk lands well, and pulls people in.

We dive the wall against a strong current. I get hooked watching two dartfish parading in front of their hole. A school of juvenile barracuda hovers in a hundred feet of water. For most of the dive a huge Napoleon wrasse cruises alongside us. I touch noses with a giant pufferfish, and the resident school of fusiliers dances the current with their unicornfish companions.

Orla and I get dropped off at Kennedy Island for our night out. We stretch out on the sand, choose our campsite, set up a fire, and clear space for the blanket. I go into the water hoping to spear dinner, but with only a hand spear and the late-afternoon feeding frenzy underway, the fish are far too alert — I get close to a few groupers, but without a proper spear they scatter before I'm in range. Still, I love going down; at forty feet I could have speared a stingray but felt sorry for her and let her be — a small weakness in the survival instinct, I suppose. Drink coconut instead. I build the fire, and we sit watching the flames — a wood fire is always its own small work of art. We lie back, watching stars flicker through the branches.

Voices break the island's quiet — three men appear. I move straight to the fire, one hand near the spear; in the middle of nowhere, especially with a woman here, my first instinct is defense. It turns out they'd run out of gas, spotted our fire, and had been paddling for three hours already. They'd come from Ringgi. They sit around the fire with us, borrow the mask and underwater torch, and disappear for a while, coming back with twelve fish. "Easy at night," one says, "the fish sleep, easy to catch." On our fire they lay some yams, and quickly build a second fire just for the fish. Once it's burning well, they pile on coral pebbles and cook the fish on top; with seashells, they scrape the burned skin off the cooked yams. The smell of smoked fish and fragrant wood has us entranced — our stomachs can't wait.

The fire burns higher, more flame so we can see what we're eating. Once the fish and yams are ready, they're laid out on fresh leaves, and we all dig in — pure flavor, sea and earth, nothing added. I thought I'd want salt at least, but my taste buds are more than satisfied without it.

We smoke some Solomon tobacco, strong enough for a mild buzz.

Once dinner's done, they build the fire back up with heavy logs, enough to last most of the night, then say goodbye and paddle silently into the dark. Two dolphins are painted on the bow of their canoe. I ask why. "Usually people paint sharks, or other things — we wanted to be different. Out on the open sea, dolphins are like friends, no?"

We fall asleep like babies, the trees standing guard over us for the night.

April 30, 2000

Birdsong instead of a gong for a wake-up call — fresh-cut papaya, a lukewarm cup of bitter coffee. Straight into the water over the wall to catch the morning's activity. Fish race across the reef; huge groupers feed around sixty feet. A few whitetips cruise the shallows. In the pass I have a close encounter with two twelve-foot gray reef sharks, along with the usual legion of anthias, sergeant majors, chromis. The reef is alive, though the bleaching still hits you square in the face — I haven't found a single unaffected table coral.

On the island, two sea eagles get chased off by a much smaller bird — they'll repeat the ritual most of the morning, with their distinctive call.

Back in the water, I swim through fields of staghorn and branching coral, thinking of a forest. At the drop-off I suddenly spot a huge gray reef shark heading straight for me. I kick my fins toward it, but it comes back for more — three passes before I manage to fend it off with a kick and it finally vanishes into the blue. I keep exploring — a lot of sharks around today. A group of female titan triggerfish cluster around a single male, fun to watch.

On land, too, you find sharks — not the same kind, but sharks nonetheless. Beautiful, and perfect at what they do. You can't keep them away entirely, but knowing them lets you stay alert — letting them come close while keeping a safe distance, knowing they'll eventually be back. They wear disguises too — seduction, manipulation — but you can't warn others about it; they won't believe you, or they'll talk themselves into believing the creature is harmless. So I watch, quietly, alone. Though in truth I'm never really alone — there's always that remembered connection to the mother, the earth. Once you start to see clearly, though, be careful not to tip into paranoia. Insight isn't without its own

risks; you're only ever aware of them, and the further you see, the more vigilant you need to become.

The trouble with sharks is they love a frenzy. Man is part shark himself — give him a reason, and the same reflex kicks in, automatic. You can see a mild version of it on board some nights, during comments and observations.

Next to our bed sits a pile of clam shells, a reminder that man is always part of the equation, never to be forgotten. Food is scarce here.

Fifty-five years ago, right where I'm sitting now, a future US president got stranded — his destroyer cut in half by a torpedo. They swam ashore. No coconuts here, so they swam two more miles to another island, eventually rescued after six days.

At 3:00, Brad picks us up. As soon as we're back aboard, Qamar asks me to tend a dive so they can set some transect pins. I can't say no. But rain starts pouring, wind picking up, and I decide to turn back — no compass, no flashlight, unable to navigate safely. I abort the dive and steer for shore, keeping a vague silhouette in sight the whole way. Soaked, we make it back just in time for tea — perfect timing. The wind shifts, and Brad starts the engine; maybe a slight overreaction, but his full attention is on the ship, and that's the right instinct. Good work.

Sunday-night speeches — mostly childhood stories, Orla recounting our own adventures. Sam stayed in town. Beers to toast with, and a superb curry. Quite a weekend.

May 1, 2000

All geared up for a transect, but while filming I realize there's too much time already used on the tape — Qamar had watched the transect footage on Sunday and rewound it, losing us a whole transect in the process.

Frustration sets in. I lay down a firm rule: nobody touches the digital camera without my permission, and everything goes back exactly where it's found.

I push hard to finish the transect as fast as possible — the weather's against us, rain clouds all around, and we have to grab our chances whenever the sky clears.

A somewhat sad comments and observations, everyone complaining about minor details — an obsession with procedure. I try to redirect the conversation and fail.

A note to myself about internal communication getting a little slack lately.

May 2, 2000

Gray skies, rain all morning — we push the transect to the afternoon. Qamar gets a little power-trippy, seeing only the science side of things; I step in to ease the tension. We still have a ship to look after — running two transects in a day, with uncertain weather, wears out the key people, and that's not wise.

Late afternoon, I take the small boat out for a spin, alone with the ocean, keeping it beside me and drifting along together — the line long enough to let me reach forty feet. Schools of feeding tuna. I reach a small island and troll for fish without luck. The sky glows. I keep dropping into the water here and there, scouting a wide stretch.

Everyone seems trapped in their role lately, growing territorial. I suspect this is exactly why I'm here — to hold the balance between all these different monads.

Tuesday night on World War Two, though little comes of the discussion.

May 3, 2000

Another transect day, the last one — we need to finish the rest of the science before scheduling more. I spot a crocodilefish, and lose myself watching small gobies.

On board, a flurry of activity — the wood pile nearly sorted, charts spread across the command room, Rich buried in the engine room.

A wall dive with Rich, Maik, Orla, Qamar, and me. We drop to a hundred and twenty feet to reach a deep wall — cruising reef sharks, a huge eagle ray feeding, schools of fusiliers. In the shallows I focus on a family of clownfish.

A trumpetfish pairs oddly with a parrotfish — strange behavior. Butterflyfish nibble at the bleaching coral heads. Strong current; we're all holding onto the reef. A great dive.

A night out aboard the RVH.

May 4, 2000

We pack the beagle with trash, fuel drums, and Maik, Rich, Brenda, and me for a town run. I spend an hour online, sending and retrieving messages.

The market is quiet on Thursdays — few vegetables on the stalls. I pick up some ripe papayas and not much else. I meet the island chief; his people are selling fish, and I spend time with the fishermen. They bring in their catch by 3:00 — the Malaitans mostly spearfish, passing the ship every morning; they'd assumed we didn't eat fish. A boy with sea-bleached hair fans the fish to keep the flies off. Today's catch: barracuda, big jacks, unicornfish, emperors. The unicornfish are fat, perfect for the barbecue. He fishes the Ferguson Pass. "I follow the current," he tells me. "The fish are always there."

Next to him, the Gilbertese stall — line-caught fish. The girl fanning theirs was one of the dancers from the competition. They have dolphinfish and tuna for sale; I ask them to swing by the ship before heading to market — fresher fish, better trade.

I spend a while watching the canoes come in with their catch, and pick up a few good dive-spot tips along the way, plenty of fish, they say.

I stop by the hotel's dive shop to mark their sites on our chart — most fall around our own anchorage. A quick snack, and my first beer in ages.

Waiting on the pier, I sacrifice some bread for a little private entertainment, feeding the fish — sergeant majors go into a frenzy over it; it isn't only sharks that lose their heads. A school of silver fish parts as big jacks patrol through, hunting. A nice little show.

Back on board, with our haul of fish, gasoline, information, light bulbs, wood preservative, and a watch, I drop Maik, Karen, and Kirsten at Kennedy Island for their own Robinson Crusoe night — though they bring plates, cutlery, cups, pots, pans, kerosene lamps, and a tarp. I remember my own night with just an army blanket, a machete, a spear, and water. The fish are going mad again, frenzy all around.

Thursday night wraps up *Mount Analogue.* With only eight of us, the discussion turns more civilized, deeper — even a moment or two of meditative silence.

May 5, 2000

Brad and Rich leave around 7:00 to scout the anchorage at Ringgi — a chance for them to reconnect a little, since they haven't talked much lately. They come back glowing, and head straight to town to arrange three drums of diesel, enough to see us to Noro, where we should be able to refuel properly.

Lab with six of us — me and the girls, a funny thought. My attention holds well. Dolphins surface to port. Good start to the day.

The bonitos are in a mad frenzy, preying on the little schooling silver fish that have taken to calling the hull home for now. I cast a line but they don't care. I buy fish instead from the Gilbertese woman at the market — she's caught a dolphinfish.

I give the ship a little attention, painting the railing — we need to get things finished. Brad moves around the ship like a small whirlpool lately, absorbed in one project after another without quite completing any of them. Time to start wrapping things up.

Qamar gets frustrated, using the science as an outlet for a struggle she can't quite name — she doesn't know what she wants, and she's leaving the ship soon; it's just a matter of time now. A science dive goes out anyway. I cook fish for lunch while working on the railing.

Friday night, the official disco night in town. I usually stay on guard with Orla and one other — a nice, peaceful time.

I plan a dive for late afternoon — lucky enough that it's just Orla and me, at Naru Gap. We drop the wall to about a hundred and twenty feet. A magical feast of fish activity.

Qamar and Brenda spend the night at Kennedy. The rest head to town for the Friday disco. I watch the rest of *South Pacific* and cook up a feast — fried fish in butter, garlic, nuts, and green pepper, sashimi to start, fish roe with lemon juice, and a bottle of white wine to crown the evening. Sweet talk on the bow.

May 6, 2000

Brenda starts a little project in acting class — interviews for her mini play. Everyone takes part except Brad. Good fun.

I tend a dive for Maik and Qamar. It starts to rain, wind picking up — I'm in the water without a rain jacket or wetsuit, freezing. The dive runs an hour; I keep diving down because it's warmer below. I wrap myself in what used to be an emergency blanket — all the foil's long gone, just a reminder of the elements at work. I know a good coffee's waiting on the ship, if I can just hold on.

A dive at Naru Gap around 5:00 p.m., the tide just turning. I buddy with Orla — the only person who lets me dive genuinely free underwater, giving me space, never crowding in when there's good action her presence might disturb. As we drop to a hundred feet, a school of five giant eagle rays cruises past, parading one by one in front of the lens — grace made flesh.

Diving the same spot enough times, the local residents become familiar — the reef sharks always in the same place, whitetips resting at eighty feet in the sandy pass. Jacks whirling around, barracuda, huge king mackerel, fusiliers moving like rain, the usual unicornfish. This time an oceanic triggerfish drops by, and suddenly a school of mobula rays glides right through the gap.

May 7, 2000

The beagle heads to town — expediting and communication. Science work wraps up.

I focus on filming stills for the reef survey. The reef is a mess — hardly a coral head unaffected, and it isn't only bleaching. Some strange disease seems to be spreading too — the center of a porites coral head overtaken by algae, a white ring of bleached coral expanding outward.

After that grim tour, I move into the shallows, where light plays over the sand and coral like a soft caress, fish casting shadows across the ripples.

The sea turns into a mirror — looking up from below toward the surface, the reef reflects back like something out of an impressionist painting. I suspect Van Gogh must have spent time underwater once, or had a very vivid underwater dream.

May 8, 2000

One group heads to town for their "expedition day." On the ship we set an early tempo — finish painting the railing, derust the winch, paint the portholes, sand the Synesthesia hatch, touch up the interior. By day's end I've set up a proper system for cameras and lights, cleaned out the radio cabinet, done a wild general clean. Rich stays busy with the compressor and winch. Music on. The ship looks good.

Everyone's back by 6:00 — Brad went surfing. Brenda hands me the schedule for the upcoming yacht-race event: war-canoe racing, an old storytelling contest, a real window into Solomon culture. Plenty of people spend time at the email office.

Tuesday night on poetry, though everyone's mostly taking the piss out of it — I can barely stand it, nearly ready to leave the table.

I've had trouble lately with Kirsten — she drains too much of my energy. I avoid talking to her, though I know avoidance isn't really the answer. A real test of my patience.

May 9, 2000

A dive expedition — Rich, Alison, Qamar, and Orla, a full dive-or-die day. We set off early, the morning light

glowing beautifully. Small group tension right away — Alison packs a lunch box just for herself and Rich, the wrong move for a shared expedition.

Qamar and Alison don't much care for each other — the ex-girlfriend and the new one rarely make a good pair. Regardless, we're off to Makuti Island.

Passing the first reef, dolphins surface, and we cut the engine to just watch — a good omen, and welcome after the odd start.

I miss the island on the first pass, but something in me suspects there's a reason for that. We finally reach Makuti. I scout the wall.

A huge stingray feeds in a small cavern; I follow her. Rich and I try to spearfish, but the gear isn't quite right — the rubber slips off. Suddenly a pod of twelve dolphins passes three meters away from me. I'm in heaven.

The dive is breathtaking — soft coral everywhere, wonderful reef architecture, fans, fish at every turn. A school of unicornfish, fusiliers. Two groupers in some kind of mating ritual — I honestly can't tell if that's what it is, but they change color and touch each other. I lose myself over overhangs, peering into crevasses. A spotted barramundi hides in one. A school of batfish cruises by.

A second dive on a sand slope — a whole garden of garden eels, feeding, bodies fully extended. A small stingray darts off as I approach with the camera. We follow a wall; a big pufferfish stares at us with huge round eyes; a lobster tastes the water with its antennae. Magic.

We head to Naru Island and spot an abandoned canoe. Rich tries to tow it, hilariously, slowly sinking as we haul it in. Ten minutes later we find a second one — now we ride into Naru with two canoes in tow, everyone's heads spinning like kids.

Another dive — a wall of encrusting sponge, a multicolored soft-coral garden, a school of mackerel, a curious whitetip, a tuna, a school of rainbow runners. I make a real effort today not to fixate on any bleached coral or disease.

A shallow dive, three meters max, focused on the small stuff — a mantis shrimp feeding under a "tit anemone," two clownfish brushing themselves against the tentacles like soft satin sheets.

Two gobies, dorsal fins erect, two black dots marking them, bob up and down in a comic little display. If that's courtship, they've already won my heart. A school of cardinalfish hides among the safety of branching coral. Clouds of tiny silver fish dance in the current.

As we surface, a double rainbow appears on the horizon, gold light coating everything, waves of tiny jumping fish glittering across the water.

A magic day.

May 11, 2000

Brad and I head to the airport in the morning; the plane lands at 9:00, but no Gaie or Lazer aboard. We're getting ready to head into town for a quick email check when Dani mentions another plane is due in fifteen minutes. A nine-seater lands, and two familiar faces peer out the windows — a dramatic entrance. The pontoon runs right out over the reef. They're both in great shape, loaded down with gear.

On board, a meeting and a ship's tour. Rich dresses the ship with flags. I sense some tension while I've been away — maybe the meeting went a little strangely.

Lazer unpacks the goodies — new dive gear from Oceanic, a new GPS, engine parts — and tonight we'll have a travel-report dinner.

Chapter Four

Gizo, Solomon Islands

May 11, 2000

Brad and I take the small boat to pick up Gaie and Lazer at the airport, meeting Dani on the dock. We talk about the ethnic tension in Honiara — a Malaitan tribe reportedly stormed a banker's office, killed him with a machete, and displayed the body in the morning market. A few influential people in Gizo are willing to fund a rerouting of air traffic to somewhere safer, a whole new international airport — estimated cost, two hundred thousand US dollars.

The plane lands, but they're not on it. We're about to head to Gizo to check email when another plane touches down fifteen minutes later, a six-seater — Lazer's face appears at the window, loaded with luggage as always.

We drive straight to the ship to unload the goodies: regulators, BCD vests, a dive computer, a wetsuit donated by Oceanic, engine parts, digital tape, charts.

One suitcase is still missing, somewhere in transit.

A strat command in the afternoon to regroup and lay out our tasks for the coming weeks — schedules, route, who's doing what.

We dive One Tree Wall. Overcast sky, but plenty of fish as always — I focus on passing tuna, sharks, barracuda, while Gaie, I know, will be watching the coral. What struck me when we first arrived hits her too — the reef is screaming, sick, with no sign of recovery.

I suddenly feel ill, on the edge of vomiting, and abort the dive. Some fish we had for lunch sent everyone in a

different direction — flushed faces, headaches, the first case of food poisoning I can remember on board.

I sleep until dinner, for our travel-report exchange.

We open with an accident-review sequence to sort out the fish issue — the freezer's broken, and fixing it becomes first priority.

Then travel reports: the RVH2 project, Lazer in Puerto Rico. We retell our own sea odyssey, from Bali to the Solomons — the voyage of a lifetime.

Full of news, and lifted by it, we fall asleep under the stars.

May 12, 2000

We start with strat meetings, finalizing our schedule here and setting a date for the coming dry dock. Brad and I rework the route I'd proposed a month ago.

We take over Synesthesia with charts and pilot books, and by the end of the morning have it worked out, with favorable winds the whole way to Singapore — assuming the pilot charts still hold true.

I spend the afternoon looking through digital tape, sorting images for Lazer.

The missing suitcase turns up, with presents from Kiko and Kelly. Latest news from Kiko: he's learning to drive a pickup truck, working, still in love with Kelly. Everyone gets something — a surf magazine for Brad, a fishing lure for me, chocolate for Brenda.

The route is presented to strat command and approved.

A dive on the west side of Kennedy — the same troubled reef, an uneventful dive. I meet a gray reef shark — a new acquaintance, if not quite a friend.

Friday-night disco, and I cook dinner for the guards — fish, of course. A peaceful evening, chilling on deck. Wind picks up; attention turns to the weather.

May 13, 2000

We start the day with an acting class run by Lazer, and an actors' meeting afterward for questions.

We dive a shallow site just outside Mbambanga — the worst dive here yet. The whole reef is smothered in algae, the water murky, a disaster zone. I film a sea cucumber. I lose Orla in the murk. We all come back with real sadness in our eyes.

By late afternoon, with Orla and Maik, we get another dive in on a drop-off. The highlight is a school of bumphead parrotfish trailing clouds of coral debris. The reef stays quiet until 5:30, then suddenly, as if someone dosed the water, it comes alive. We spot a flatworm feeding. Fields of staghorn with their usual mad clouds of anthias.

The crew gets ready for a party — a mellow one. Music on deck, baked fish, a cocktail mixed by Lazer, and good moods all around.

May 14, 2000

No wake-up call — the one time the ship truly wakes at its own pace. I edit some tape. Around 2:00 we head out for a dive, at "the Orla spot," and it turns into one to remember. Fish action the whole way down — three huge gray reef sharks greet us as we drop to a hundred and twenty feet, two eagle rays feeding along the edge of the wall.

Schools of jacks, unicornfish, red-lip snapper, hundreds of small barracuda, whitetips everywhere. Some of the biggest barracuda I've seen cruise past. The action

never lets up — fusiliers feeding all around us, a full-on feeding frenzy. No one thinks of surfacing. Enchanted, transformed, the whole fluid mentality, the aquatic tribe in full swing.

Sunday dinner under the stars, and our now-famous speeches.

May 15, 2000

A quick run into town for communication — I renew my PADI membership online and pick up vegetables and fruit at the market. In and out fast; we need to get back, since we're moving the ship to Noro to refuel. Brad in command, we pass the Kennedy Island gap, cruise the Ferguson Passage, and enter the "gulf" of Noro, anchoring opposite the tuna cannery. Gaie and I go to arrange diesel and check the dock — we can dock the next day. The smell is overwhelming; workers with the strongest arms I've ever seen load ice onto fishing trawlers. Back on board, the rain picks up. We catch two fish. Right after dinner, signs of food poisoning again — I can hardly believe it. The ship turns into a small madhouse — accident sequence, a blowup from Lazer, a first-aid scramble to recover. Wind's picking up too, and Brad puts two people on watch. We collect rainwater; the desalinator isn't really desalinating, so we'll need to bunker fresh water tomorrow.

Body count: six people out of commission. A strange energy has taken over the ship — everyone can feel the thick cloud of it.

May 16, 2000

Time to get on with it. A quiet lab session. Brad and Rich scout the dock — a barge and tugboat sit there already. We raise anchor, Lazer filming, and we're underway. A small confrontation with Brad — his hand is shaking,

we're coming in too fast, and I shout, "Slow down!" The small boat pushes us in the rest of the way. Close call, my heart pounding. I go with the Mobil manager to the bank, then to the factory for ice. Inside their office, upstairs is all Japanese staff with laptops; downstairs looks like a rundown operation, frozen tuna dropping into containers with a cacophony of metallic noise.

I can't find engine oil anywhere.

I catch a ride back with a worker loaded down with ice, pay the dock and port fees, and we head off for the cove near Ringgi. The weather's picking up; everyone's on their toes.

Rich calls a night out, overriding Gaie, Lazer, and me on the decision. We clear up the misunderstanding. I cook pizza with Gaie, set up a nice spread with beer, and everyone turns up — good bonding talk about the coming dry dock.

The anchorage is paradise — a view of the volcano, mangroves all around us.

Parrots fly overhead, and local villagers wave from their canoes. The anchor drags once, and we reset it. Secure now.

May 17, 2000

Strat command in Nemo's, while the rest of the crew explores the cove — canoes everywhere. A carver from a nearby village comes aboard, unpacking his wares. We all fall for a delicately carved turtle, inlaid with nautilus shell.

We trade pots, pans, fins, and three hundred Solomon dollars for the coveted turtle.

We finally get to strat business proper, and there's a lot on the table. I get pushed hard by Rich and Brad, especially over dive procedures — something I've

wrestled with for years now. You can't put a wild fish in a small tank and not expect it to try to escape. I get support at last from Qamar, Gaie, and Lazer. Rich turns almost fanatical about procedure, and we have to hammer home that rules are meant as guidelines — know when to bend them, but don't become their servant. The route becomes another sore subject; it's clear everyone's aboard for different reasons, and that can breed conflict. I find it hard going. The Planetary Coral Reef Foundation is technically leading this expedition — meaning Gaie — and she's been challenged more than once these past few days. I admire her restraint. I leave the meeting shattered. I can take criticism, but I hadn't expected quite that reaction, and when seriously attacked, instead of pushing back loudly, I absorbed it. I meet with Brad afterward to clear the air. With Rich, it's a more delicate matter — it takes me the whole night to sit with what happened.

There's also confusion around roles, and what they're supposed to entail.

Orla and I set off in the canoe, threading a mangrove tunnel into another bay — smooth paddling, watching birds nesting, singing, chasing each other. Parrots love hanging in the coconut trees. We pass families out in canoes; fish jump all around us. In the back of our minds, we're aware that saltwater crocodiles are known to live in these coves. We keep bailing the canoe, which leaks at the bow, punctuated by a cigarette break. Green and red parrots fly overhead. An osprey, fish clutched in its talons, returns to its nest near the top of the volcano; another follows close behind.

The anchorage is stunning, and we decide to stay another day.

All day, kids paddle by trying to sell fruit — the village hasn't caught much fish lately.

In the evening we have a Tuesday dinner marking Gizo Week, though the energy's low, and my mind can't quite settle into it.

Still, the night is sweet, with a full moon rising.

May 18, 2000

Some gasoline spills over the dive gear — a quick cleanup, then we continue our strat discussion through the rest of the morning. Brad and I work on the route, and float the idea of crossing three oceans in five months — a wild notion, since it loses sight of the bigger picture. Neither the ship nor the crew is really ready for a voyage like that, and RVH2 is still only in the planning stages, a ship that would need its own outfitting and so on. Still, it helps clarify the strategy: stay within coral reef territory for now.

During acting class in the afternoon we review our different "resonating chambers" and conduct some interviews for the website. I get quite emotional talking about the state of the reef, and my dream of seeing a cetacean nation take shape in my lifetime. Reefs are sick worldwide, and it doesn't stop — even in the most remote places, with minimal human impact, they're dying. I go on about the future, the managers of tomorrow, the sea-people dream.

I cook with Orla for Thursday dinner. The islanders bring us a chicken — alive. Kirsten, in charge of Synesthesia, bursts into tears; she's vegetarian. Maik kills it, I cook it. We talk about our way of life aboard, and what the different themed nights mean to us. I realize I've talked about all this plenty, but it often takes some outside voice for it to really land. Lazer tells the story of his famous thirty-six-day voyage, and leaves everyone breathless — a story that still needs to be written down properly.

The energy is good tonight, and it clears away some of the tension from the past few days.

At night I notice a low resonance in my head. I ask Orla if she hears anything. "No, nothing." What I'm hearing is like a low-frequency vibration — I'm used to a high-pitched ringing in my ears from the rigging, but this is different, almost like the vibration of the planet itself, a kind of pulse. I can't shake it. I walk the ship checking for anything unusual, but find nothing. I lie down, listening. No idea what it is — for a moment I even wonder if it's coming from the volcano. A tender night with Orla.

May 19, 2000

We hold a lab session. Rich pulls a bit of a power move, refusing to attend because a few people were two minutes late — Gaie's not pleased, and it's clearly the last straw for her on that front. Rich sometimes takes things a step too far. We take a crew photo and get underway, moving the ship back to our old anchorage. Brenda and Qamar are out on their own expedition until Sunday. Brad pilots us out of the cove beautifully and back to anchor by 1:30. A trip goes into town while we lower the beagle and stay busy.

The anchor sets superbly, dug in deep.

We hold a strat session on the stern with a few beers. We've come a long way over the last three days — most of the friction surfaced, and we've come out the other side more of a solid team. Magic, really. Brad's grown confident in his role, Rich has tempered his almost-religious intensity, and I feel like I've grown more this past week than in a long time. I can't stop grinning, hugging everyone.

Friday-night disco, and Lazer, Brad, Kirsten, and Alison head to town — pouring rain, and it takes real dedication to whatever cause to push through it.

I cook fish and get into an intense conversation with Gaie, about my own growing intensity and my dream of a cetacean nation. Orla wants more of my time, but I explain — my closest friends are here, and I want time with them too. A full moon and a night rainbow, something I've never seen before. I sleep like a log. Happy me.

May 20, 2000

Johnny arrives today. We clean the ship, prepare a brunch. Gaie and Lazer pick him up — he arrives radiant despite fifty hours already on the road. We dive straight into the Sixth Kingdom, world civilizations, the Renaissance, the synthetic age, and the future, the Synergetic. The ship can rise to new heights, he says. We look at our own culture here — the memes from the past that survived, the ones that died out, always a continuous evolution, different strategies for different futures. As Johnny talks, my mind keeps making instant connections, tying his ideas straight to things I've lived through here. What a rush. Brad listens wide-eyed. Johnny has this gift for putting into words what my mind has been circling around, unable to quite say. My chest tells me plenty; I feel something like a direct transfer of energy. I get that same feeling with Gaie often — conscious or not, I can't say, but it's real. The power of dreams. I am a dreamer, and the constant dream of sea people allied with a nation of cetaceans, working and living for the future.

A storm of thoughts, ideas, and insight rushes by — like the whole crew's been intoxicated by Johnny's mind. A delight to watch the transformed faces coming out of Nemo's afterward.

Ferdi arrives at 6:00 with news from the savanna country, and hello from Claus, plus the whole list of expedited items sent through by email — a radiant smile on his face.

Saturday's party turns into the art of conversation in full swing — music, words, food, and a full moon rising.

I pass out in the arms of the night.

May 21, 2000

Acting class run by Johnny — breath, action, environment. We do the walking exercises: Western walk, Indian walk, Asian walk, all a matter of catching the moment's vibe. It clears everyone's mind about why theater has a place on this ship. We prepare for a procession to open Gizo Week.

Actors' lunch — we talk through the week ahead. Some real talk on the nature of theater itself, though the logistics still need to fall into place first.

A route meeting in the afternoon: this region, Southeast Asia, for the next two years, then a move toward Japan, Russia, and Alaska, aiming to reach San Francisco by 2005.

A good meeting — the direction feels clear, smooth, logical. And exciting too — whales and cetacean-nation dreams on the edge of the Arctic, the cultures of Japan and Russia, rough weather ahead.

Out for a dive off Kennedy Island; Johnny and Gaie stay on the beach, Johnny reading Jack London and Konrad Lorenz — living out the spirit of true adventure. The dive itself is mellow.

Back aboard, I need to deal with Karen — no more filming on the ship except when we've deliberately set aside time for it.

An emotional Sunday-night speeches session; we all end up below deck as the rain pours down.

I keep circling back to the cetacean-nation idea — a path unfolding, and the whole improbable miracle of the Heraclitus unfolding with it. A platform for living out a dream, a dream machine, in the tradition of Lorenz and London, moving toward the space age. Pioneers — not pseudo-mystics, but people actually doing things, in real space and real time, our space and our time.

Alison opens up a little. I'd sensed for a while there was some childhood trauma there, and now it makes more sense — she used to be struck on the hands while reading, if she made a mistake. She seems to be reenacting that pattern over and over, the victim role, something she may unconsciously keep seeking out. A father-figure wound.

Brad performs a Kerouac-style piece, Gaie takes us on a mystic journey, Lazer continues his thirty-six-day-voyage story. Qamar talks about leaving the ship, and there's a lot of childhood memory shared all around.

May 22, 2000

The start of Gizo Week. We're up for sunrise — the volcano keeps some cloud to itself, wind blowing. We won't move the ship right away. Costumes get loaded, and by 7:30 the beagle's bow is pounding through the sea.

Once again, Heraclitus theater magic opens the week — we close out the parade right in front of the podium for the opening ceremony. The organizer introduces each group; the parade is mostly schoolchildren. Our costumes draw a roar of applause, and the lionfish costume terrifies the kids.

A mention of the events in Honiara, reassuring the yachts here that Gizo remains safe.

Eight yachts here so far.

Johnny gets to talking with a cameraman shooting for National Geographic — I like him immediately, we understand each other with a glance. He'll interview Johnny and Gaie this afternoon.

A pipe band performs, dressed in traditional costume with modern touches — cardboard standing in for shells, potato sacks for tree bark, PVC pipe instruments. I shoot a roll of film, the first in a while.

The war canoes aren't here — they're in Honiara, of all places. Almost funny; Gizo's at peace, so why would the war canoes be anywhere else but in the thick of actual conflict? It makes it feel more real, somehow. There's enough spectacle here already without adding to it. Dance, dance — that's the magic; not to dance is the tragedy.

Johnny and I stroll through town, visit the tourism office, comment on old postures and beliefs — photographs from 1900, war canoes, the era of Jack London.

Different ecological niches, different communities with their own fishing techniques — the Malaitans expert spearfishers, the Gilbertese line fishermen. The contrast lays itself out right there in the market: jacks, unicornfish, groupers on one side, tuna, bonito, and kingfish on the other.

We share a beer, a mild buzz. The town's buzzing too. I keep watching faces, especially the kids' eyes — I sit with them, and we laugh together.

Yachts sail past, decks crowded with uniformed schoolchildren, circling the harbor.

By noon we're back aboard. Gaie and Brad keep working the route. I crash after a wonderful lunch from Orla, onion soup and cheese toast. I pick up the accordion

Ferdi brought back and play for twenty minutes, then study the pilot charts for the coming route.

Peace on board. We shipshape to move the ship, but a strong current in the channel — and, I suspect, Brad's reluctance to deal with it, which I don't push against either, content with the choice — keeps us anchored here another night.

*In bliss because my best friends are here,
on the ocean,
dreaming the future of mankind,
dreaming our dreams,
shaping our lives.
we observe cultures,
to better know ourselves,
my chest plays me tricks,
pounding to the beat of the earth,
in the ocean I recollect myself.
Johnny, Gaie, and Lazer feed me my intoxication,
mind, body, and soul.
the crew shines, happy, happy.
I am not always sure if they know it themselves.
but I enjoy seeing it.*

Johnny once wrote a book about freedom. In his own way, he hands us a few keys — whether we open the doors ourselves is another matter, and whether we can even open them yet another. But it always starts with intent. You have to want it first, consciously, not as some intellectual exercise but as a genuine desire.

The Heraclitus could be one of the best platforms there is for shaping minds that might actually make a difference down the line. At least the platform exists — or maybe I'm just a fool, but it feels good to be this particular kind of fool.

The skill lies in being heard at all. With discipline and dedication, a mind can be shaped for the kind of stewardship the future will need — synergetic

stewardship. We live here with different nationalities aboard, in about as culturally dynamic a setting as exists. We have the privilege of passing along real information, in a sea of information overload that could otherwise just drown a person. We benefit from years of hard, dedicated thought about what man is, or could become. The information we share are seeds — not all of them will sprout, but it only takes one to grow into something beautiful. Enough people, and you get a whole healthy forest, one that might even help regenerate other forests that have been cut down, brainwashed, trees straining to bear fruit that's simply too hard for them right now. They're all potentially tall, healthy trees. But they've been told not to worry about it, fed synthetic fruit instead of growing their own. It has to come from inside first, or the hunger never really gets satisfied. True friends are the ones who help you grow your own fruit — not only for yourself, but so you can help others grow theirs too. And if the day comes when more trees bear fruit than don't, some kind of balance returns. Not a fifty-fifty balance — a dynamic one. But there's only so much weight one side can carry before it tips. I'm not sure it would fully collapse, but can we consciously steer the course of humanity at all? Maybe that's arrogance. But is the right kind of arrogance not also a gift?

Behind the noise of emotional reaction, conscious action can slowly take root. We have a tool for that on board: theater. Personally, I've barely scratched its depths. I keep working at my own shell, sometimes reaching something like my true self underneath. There's this other "I" that watches over, or alongside, me — letting me recognize, now and then, the shape of something like destiny, if such a thing exists. Maybe I'm just the lucky winner of a lottery ticket. Either way, it's not the moment for self-pity — better to ride the ticket for what it's worth. On the road less traveled, there's always the

risk of falling. Isn't that always the toast — without the risk of falling, we wouldn't dance at all?

Who put these great teachers on my path, and why do they spend their time teaching me? I sometimes wonder if I'm not simply stealing their time. Other times I feel sure I'm exactly the right person for it. Carried along by these dreams, and by people willing to help me dream them —

I'm going full speed ahead. I might feel differently tomorrow, but right now: thank you.

Reading back what I've just written, it reads almost like a love letter. It probably is. There's an intimacy in words that lets you say what you can't always say out loud — the voice cracks, the mind won't allow it.

Back to life in the Solomons. The smell of melting chocolate drifts up from the porthole of Nemo's, our little temple of words and written thought. The dinner bell will ring around 7:30 — anticipation building. Minds at peace, absorbed in words. I find myself here in this small treasure house, pounding out my own words, pouring my mind onto a screen, bits of information stored in some kind of nothingness. Where does it all go? Does it reach anywhere? Somehow the act of writing it down makes it feel more important — a direct line from mind to word, otherwise it would simply be lost, gone. And yet does it even matter? I was just complaining about information overload, and here I am adding more to the pile.

What matters right now is dinner, coming soon. A good one.

Dinner turns into a travel report from Ferdi, and the comments that follow are warm.

May 23, 2000

We decide to move the ship in the afternoon, after some discussion and a mild argument. We send Sam off to compete in the "iron woman" event in town. I have a great historical-scientific-poetic conversation with Johnny, new insight into the whole Biosphere 2 story — the synthetic world overtaking the synergetic one, wrecking the place, to put it simply. Having it for themselves isn't enough; they seem set on destroying the very thing they claim to have won.

I drop Alison in town — she's baked fudge to sell. The sea's rough, and I love the motion of it. We arrive soaked.

Sam's on the dock, triumphant — she's won the iron-woman contest, Karen came second. We meet Bill, a handsome Californian cameraman and filmmaker, then head back to the ship.

After some back-and-forth on taking the long or short route into Gizo Harbor, we get the ship shipshape and set off through the channel. Brad's a nervous wreck but maneuvers us through with real skill, and by 3:00 we're anchored beside the other yachts in the harbor.

I spend the afternoon with the pilot charts, taking it easy. Part of the crew is in town enjoying the last of the festivities, which are winding down. Rain pours all afternoon, and most events get canceled. We try to catch the custom storytelling. It sounded great on paper, but the event turns out to be held in the community hall — under a tin roof, men from all over the western province gather, not many, but a representative from each island. There's no actual storytelling that night, but I sit down anyway, and we talk — about the sea, reefs, art. Most of them came hoping to sell their carvings; without a sale, they won't have money for gas to get home. The pressure's real for them. Meanwhile, up at the Gizo

Hotel, the yachties are eating lobster and steak at more than seventy Solomon dollars a plate.

I keep drifting between the two scenes, my heart siding with the islanders. We sit on the floor, talking about the weather, how hard it is to get married around here.

Sitting on the dock, caught between two timelines, two cultures each evolving in their own direction, tonight I can't quite settle. Romantic, foolish me, still dreaming of turquoise lagoons, women in grass skirts dancing under the full moon — the power of the images that filled my childhood, the old quest for paradise, the garden of Eden.

May 24, 2000

The day starts with a hot cup of coffee, finances on the table first. By 10:00 we have a lively route meeting, the ideas flowing — a decade of exploration, traveling through the cultures of Melanesia and Micronesia, the running theme from sea people to space people.

The realization that the "earth" is really the planet ocean, and out of that land burst minds reaching for another Earth — Mars. A nice thought: the mind of planet Earth belongs to the ocean's creatures, the dolphins and whales, dreaming man the traveler into being. They can't go to space themselves, but surely they dream of it. So the route will take us across the whole globe, reviving — or evolving, I should say — the region's fading sea cultures. Outboard motors are taking over everywhere; no one paddles anymore. In the afternoon the islanders hold their canoe races, but every entry is motorized. With a little imagination I can strip away the motors, the Western clothing, the noise, and picture it as it might have looked once. The winners bask under the watchful eyes of the island beauties, giggling at any handsome face.

Plenty of betel nut for sale in the market today, more than usual — party season, I suppose.

Billy and an Australian man come aboard to plan a trip up the volcano, for a film shoot.

The volcano is believed to have given birth to the island's cultures — old ruins sit on the higher plateau, remains of huge settlements from a few thousand years back. Certain words persist across the coastal cultures; though each speaks a different language, names for fish, ocean, and so on stay remarkably similar, hinting at some shared root, or at least a spreading of memes.

In town I photograph faces and scenes — the whole town lined up to watch the start of the race. Meanwhile the fighting in Honiara continues, the Fijian government has apparently been overthrown too, and of course, where else would the war canoes be but there.

A visit to the immigration office to clear Qamar for departure tomorrow. We'll celebrate with her tonight.

In the town hall, the energy builds. The stage is set, children sit up front, everyone waiting — it's the dance competition. Solomon time, meaning things start when they're ready to start.

Judges appear one by one, carefully noting each contestant on paper.

A group from Simbo arrives, painted head to toe in different shades of mud, marching in with war songs, carrying shields and stone axes, dancing. The crowd goes wild. Another group follows, painted to perform the dance of the megapode bird — laughter everywhere.

A panpipe group nearly brings the stage down with the force of their playing. We all sit entranced.

Then Dani's daughter and three friends perform a Melanesian ballet.

The Gilbertese beat out their rhythm on the drum table, voices rising, the dancers acting out old remembered stories with precise, careful gestures.

We head back to the ship hoping to keep dancing, but the crew's already mellow, winding down.

May 25, 2000

Gaie, Lazer, and Johnny head off with Billy Barber, Irn, and a film crew to the volcano — two days visiting old forts. On the ship, a tense strat meeting brings more friction to the surface.

Everyone scatters into town — there's a "custom chief and queen" contest starting at 2:00.

First, a man from Choiseul, wearing shell money around his neck, and a young woman, bare-breasted, sharing old custom stories. She actually works at the bank, and it clearly took courage to expose herself like this for tradition's sake — a little uneasy, but strikingly beautiful. A man from Simbo follows, telling us about the old days.

I step outside with one of the chiefs to photograph him in his natural setting, talking about the past, before heading back into the thick of it.

Suddenly Maik calls me over, urgent — Qamar needs to leave within the hour. We all rush back to the ship, except Alison, who stays for the contest.

We watch Qamar pack in Bio, giving away chocolate. She gives me a hat, half a bottle of rum, and the last kretek cigarette on board. We see her off, and she's overcome, bursting into tears. I feel one roll down my own cheek.

But Qamar's back soon after — she missed her flight, and will leave in the morning instead.

We have a Tuesday dinner themed around the master musicians of Jajouka, and end up in a jam session with Ferdi — I'm thoroughly hooked on the accordion now, the sound and the emotion it can carry.

We hear music drifting from town; Orla and I race over to catch the last two dances — modern dances from the Gilbertese, everyone showing off their best girls.

May 26, 2000

We see Qamar off safely to the airport. Sam heads into town to collect her prize money — two hundred and fifty Solomon dollars, well earned as iron-woman champion. I spend time on the ship with Brad, working out the route, catching up on video editing.

The expedition trio — Gaie, Lazer, Johnny — return in high spirits but exhausted from the volcano trip. We dine on fish and hear the story of their adventure. Johnny goes into a talk about different energy states: constructive, vital, sensitive, conscious, creative, transcendent.

We head to town for the big disco night. A few beers to set the mood, and the town hall turns into a sweaty, steamy dance frenzy. I dance wildly, and men ask my permission to dance with my "wife" — Orla — and for approval before asking any female crew member. I keep a careful eye out for everyone's safety; there's a lot of raw energy in the room. The Solomon Islanders are wonderfully direct — girls swarm around Maik, asking outright if he'll come to bed with them. I get properly drunk myself, dancing slow, soaking up the atmosphere. We head back to the ship by 2 a.m.

I fall asleep on my watch, too intoxicated to stay awake — the first time in a long while I've felt quite like that.

May 27, 2000

We move the ship back to Mbambanga Island, a precise, artful maneuver.

Brad's finally fully in control, and I can let my attention rest a little — I realize my eyes have been everywhere lately, never a second's break. We need to reset the anchor once we arrive.

Late afternoon, one of the best dives yet — golden light pouring over everything, fish absolutely everywhere. A school of tuna races in to feed on silversides. A spotted ray visits Orla, inches from her face. Gray reef sharks patrol the reef; schools of black snapper hover near the surface. Mackerel cruise by. A wild feeding time.

A night discussion with Johnny, Gaie, Brad, and me — the Heraclitus as a freedom ship, and the future, management viewed through the lens of time.

Deep sleep. Orla's struggling a little — I don't have much attention to spare for her right now, but the expedition has to come first. If the foundation isn't solid, it's only a matter of time before something collapses.

May 28, 2000

Billy Barber and Irn come aboard to film. Johnny and Irn talk in Nemo's about Solomon cultures and civilizations; I lean through the porthole to catch it all. Then a dive with Gaie to film the bleaching and algae overgrowth. In the afternoon, a strat command with Johnny expanding on the different energies — a great meeting. Sunday-night speeches.

May 29, 2000

We prepare our theater performance for the village. The night before, cooking with Brad, we workshopped a

piece about an expedition traveling the world studying music — a voyage through Spain, Egypt, America, blues country, seeding the shape of the piece.

We dive with Gaie to collect footage for the reef survey, feeding into the RVH2 project — like an underwater dance, two bodies gliding through our favorite element, witnesses to an ecosystem gone wrong. Sick reef; we gather the evidence to eventually show the world. There's a real sense of urgency in our movements. I film bleaching, algae overgrowth; Gaie points out more signs of distress. I end the dive shooting healthy coral and beautiful patterns instead, not wanting to lose hope entirely. We surface satisfied, mission accomplished.

On board, we scramble to tie up loose ends before Gaie and Lazer's departure. By 7:00 we eat, reviewing our theater plan, then load the beagle with the troupe and head once more for the village.

We're seated in a row and welcomed, crowned with flowers, scented garlands that leave us a little dizzy with the smell of them. A formal introduction, and it's decided the village will open the evening. They perform their dance and songs first, and we sit in something like ecstasy, unable to stop smiling.

Then we perform our piece. The tempo holds; the play moves well, carried by the energy already built up — we play out the world for them.

We're invited afterward to learn some of their dances and songs, taught by the man who choreographed them all.

May 30, 2000

The rush is on now. A last strat command, reviewing our wild plan for a decade-long expedition around the globe. Tension over roles — I'll keep the second-mate role until

Kavieng, then hand it to Ferdi and Maik. We all sit with pencils in hand.

A meeting with Alison, finance talk with Gaie, last words with Johnny, video transfer with Lazer.

We'd planned a farewell lunch, but Lazer checks the ticket — the plane's just landed. A mad rush to the airport, frantic scramble to get everyone off the ship in time.

The quickest hugs of my life, and they're gone.

The ship suddenly feels different.

We schedule a dive for the afternoon — Ferdi, Orla, Kirsten, Gerald, and me, near Kennedy Island. A nice, mellow dive. A huge gray reef shark at a hundred and thirty-five feet, an eagle ray gliding overhead, the reef top alive — titan triggerfish guarding their nests, attacking anything that comes close, regardless of size.

I reconnect with Orla, who'd all but disappeared for three days. We find our way back to each other.

Comments and observations turns heated tonight. I sleep like a log afterward, not even noticing the rain pouring down on me — just gone for the night.

May 31, 2000

A morning meeting, planning the week and what needs doing, and who's leaving the ship. Brad's having trouble trusting people — a small power trip, I think, no big deal. I dive the hull and photograph the growth on it. Finance talk with Sam, meetings here and there. I have trouble keeping my emotions in check today, reacting instead of acting — buttons pushed, and I let myself get dragged into it.

Eddie's on board — he'll stay for three days at first. He assisted Gaie's team on their volcano expedition, and

expressed real interest in spending more time with us. He carries himself like a warrior, proud, with a kind of gentle strength.

June 1, 2000

Jesse arrives at 10:00, a healthy young man from Alabama, southern accent, outgoing — he settles right into the ship. We meet him, open-minded.

A transect in the early afternoon. Billy Barber shows up in a yellow kayak to interview me and shoot some underwater footage — good timing, since we've just loaded the beagle for a transect and finish it in under two hours, Sam's first. We dive the wall late afternoon, an uneventful dive that only deepens my sense of the global scale of the disaster. I dig under a patch of algae — must be recent, since healthy coral survives underneath, though not for much longer without sunlight.

In the evening Irn visits; we all dine together. Later Billy opens up, and we talk until 1 a.m. about life and different points of view.

He spends the night aboard, leaving early the next morning.

June 2, 2000

My sister Isabelle's birthday. We finish a transect in the morning — I push hard, moving fast underwater to get it done.

June 3, 2000

Sam's sister arrives — Charlie steps aboard, and Sam, glowing, shows her around. That evening people try to put together a party for Kirsten's birthday, but it doesn't

quite come together, and we end up on deck with not much energy to speak of.

June 4, 2000

A lazy Sunday, most of the morning spent on top of Nemo's. The beagle heads to the airport to pick up Steven; Sam also recovers her lost bag there.

We plan a dive for the afternoon — a shallow one first, in a raging current, holding onto the reef. I get great shots of jacks, a barracuda, sharks. A second dive with Maik, down to a hundred and thirty-eight feet, meeting a graceful, entirely unshy silvertip. The top of the reef is dark with fish.

Sunday dinner — new faces, new voices, new speeches. I talk about the state of the reefs, and the future of sea people.

After dinner, under an unusually clear, star-filled sky, Jesse plays guitar and sings — genuinely well. The Blue Planet Reef Band, I suspect, is about to be born.

June 5, 2000

A trip to town after strat. We talk about people — Jesse and Steven just arrived, others taking time off, and the question of Eddie.

We decide to give Eddie a chance. He comes to town to pay for his passport.

The bank's closed. All communication lines are down. Email still works. Rumor has it the prime minister of the Solomons has been taken hostage. No planes are flying out of Gizo, and the international airport in Honiara is shutting down. We have no way to get cash right now, let alone arrange visas for PNG.

I cook with Jesse tonight, a beef curry — a slight rush to get it done in time, coming straight off a dive, heads still full of images of eagle rays, bumphead parrotfish, clouds of anthias. We throw ourselves into a wild theme, reenacting the Blues Brothers, dancing like fools, hollering like turkeys.

The evening's comments session opens with the news from Honiara, stirring up a kind of low-grade paranoia. I steer the conversation instead toward the newly forming Heraclitus Blue Planet Earth Band.

Rain and wind add to the mystery of the night, as if we couldn't be left with just the stars. Lightning, faces briefly lit, my own face shown to the darkness for a split second.

June 6, 2000

News reaches us that armed militants have seized the Solomon Islands' capital, Honiara, and are demanding the prime minister's resignation — the second such coup attempt in the South Pacific in as many weeks, after a similar takeover in Fiji. Reports describe months of simmering ethnic tension between Malaitan and Guadalcanal militants finally boiling over, with the prime minister reportedly held under armed guard at his own home, and the country's police apparently siding with the rebels. Communications and the airport in Honiara are cut off from the rest of the world.

This is what we piece together through the internet. By the time we reach town around 10:00, the communication lines are down entirely. Telikom is open but can't send or receive anything; the bank operates locally but can't process cards or foreign exchange, since all its outside lines are down too.

Walking the street, I see people hovering anxiously over a newsstand counter — "one of today's, one of

yesterday's" — a plane's landed with fresh newspapers, and everyone's hungry for news. The headline: armed forces have taken over in Honiara.

We could easily have missed all of this in our own paradise of an anchorage. Now we're glued to the radio, hungry for updates like everyone else. I can only think of my grandmother's stories of the Second World War — so we're all eager to understand more.

Life goes on. We buy vegetables and meat for dinner. Once the communication lines come back up, we celebrate with a few beers, light-headed with the relief of it. All this tension, in a sense, imaginary for us, since none of it touches us directly — the mind games of our era. We could just as easily go on with our lives, ignoring the news entirely.

I find myself out on the foresail, antenna angled just right to catch Australian broadcast news. Off Bengkulu, on the coast of Sumatra where the ship once anchored, an earthquake measuring 7.9 has killed forty people. In Jayapura, one of our old ports of call, talk of Irian Jaya's push for independence from Indonesia. Suddenly we're paying close attention to world news. And all the while, the reef keeps screaming for help. How I wish I could answer it — but humanity, tangled up in her own small dramas, rarely has time left over for the larger, quieter emergencies. Will we ever learn from history? Such a short memory we carry.

This morning I ran lab, talking the group through the exercise. My attention was fully present — biosphere, planet ocean, the truth laid bare, and still humanity's mad rush forward, forgetting where it all came from. It's almost enough to make me cry, some days.

A jam session for dinner — the groove takes over, percussion, a drum circle. I fall into the beat and ride it. The rhythm wheel, the right note at the right time.

June 7, 2000

Into Gizo to communicate and try to withdraw money. No sign of tension here — life carries on as usual. The telecom lines are back, and local flights are running again.

We stock up on food, get cash. I buy limes by the kilo, coconuts, eggplants, bananas. Dani's in better spirits today, looking on the brighter side. Little news filtering through from Honiara — the armed rebels are still in control, streets patrolled day and night, still no international flights in or out of the country.

On board, Brad and Rich feel Riversong should join us in Rabaul, and there's concern over Karen and Brenda's plan to leave from here. The crew's in good spirits regardless — plenty getting done, shrouds, outboard motors, the whole deck looking like a war zone of half-finished projects.

Late-afternoon dive. Gliding down the wall, a school of jacks meets me. An eagle ray lets me approach within ten centimeters before drifting unhurriedly down into the depths. Two twelve-foot gray reef sharks patrol the hundred-and-thirty-foot mark, unicornfish schooling behind clouds of fusiliers. Low sun, and rain earlier in the day.

An accordion session on the bow — shooting stars, a melancholy tune working itself out of my head, fingers riding the emotion.

In Nemo's, a Clint Eastwood film. Irn visits — we were supposed to climb the volcano together, but it's clearly not the time. All the community's key people are tied up in meetings; rumor has it the chiefs of the western province will meet tomorrow to discuss declaring the province autonomous, apart from the conflict in Honiara.

June 8, 2000

A morning meeting — Karen's still determined to get to Australia if possible. I've been listening to the radio; there are no flights out of Honiara. We're safe here, no tension in Gizo, life going on as normal.

A dive in the morning. It isn't only the political situation in peril — the reefs are still screaming in my ears. We dive a bommie, and every branching coral there is either bleaching or already dead, colonized by algae. Stressed coral gets taken over by stronger opportunists, sponges, invertebrates — you only have to look at our own hull, entirely covered in growth after just two weeks. Is there anything to do but bear witness to the disaster?

All I can do is let a tear roll down my cheek, and keep filming. But who wants to hear about reefs right now, with the real possibility of civil war close by? Even continuing to dive can look like the wrong way to spend one's time, to some. It's the same reasoning, exactly, that keeps us from focusing on what actually matters most. Without healthy oceans, without forests, it isn't just a few unfortunate souls caught up in ethnic conflict — it's all of humanity losing the ability to sustain itself. That's the real tragedy.

I keep diving so as not to lose focus, whatever the political weather. I can't change the world, but I can try to ring the bell.

Existentially, we're fine here — a small study in memes. Here we are, in paradise, and could simply stay there, but instead let a few words on the radio, a headline in a newspaper, become the whole focus of our attention. A few decades ago, we might never have gotten the news at all — a few islands away might as well have been worlds away.

The world changes so fast now. Acceleration, time, time, time — full speed ahead, rarely questioning the direction

at all, the whole human sphere out of balance, evolving, though I can only guess at what "evolving" even means anymore. Change is the one constant, sure, but change isn't the same as evolution. Always the values, the qualities — and here I come again with my philosophy of beauty. It changed me. Could it change the world? A lunatic at large. Planet ocean, what are we doing to you? Killing the hand that feeds us — not literally, perhaps, except our own chances of survival. The apocalypse.

Latest from the Honiara situation: the Australian government is evacuating its citizens. Still no international flights, and the conflict seems to be deepening.

The crew's back from town, Karen taking sobriety tests on people for fun. Rich got engine oil, but not a word of apology for being over an hour and a half late — especially given that this morning he refused to let Eddie drive the small boat as tender, on the grounds he wasn't certified, when Eddie probably handles a boat, and fixes an engine, better than any of us. Another case of procedure followed blindly.

I'm getting tired of it, especially since what actually matters keeps getting lost in the tunnel vision. Just frustrated. It'll pass.

June 9, 2000

We decide to cancel Friday-night disco — unsure how the local situation might play out, with a ship carrying four hundred people arriving from Honiara. Better safe than sorry. I focus on communications, keeping up with the latest news online — almost comical, watching myself with the radio glued to my ear for updates. We buy more food; the crew checks in with home.

More tension aboard — a meeting on the small boat with Brad. We finally visit ICLARM; all the expat staff are

pulling out, scientists packing up their samples, and we've arrived right at the worst possible time. Karen exasperates me — she was supposed to collect water-temperature data, but spends thirty minutes talking about her honors degree and her interest in invertebrates instead. I have to push her, hint heavily about the temperature readings. She's just not direct.

June 10, 2000

Latest from Honiara: serious fighting, a hundred people reportedly killed. On board, our own meetings reflect the mood. By now I'm convinced Riversong shouldn't come to the Solomons after all, and that neither Karen nor Brenda should try to leave from here. I made the mistake of letting Sam and Kirsten continue with their own holiday plans earlier. Not that I fear for anyone's safety exactly — but for the political and internal group dynamics it stirs up. I've been in worse situations, honestly. Danger is relative; I was more anxious in PNG than I am about a conflict two hundred miles away right now. This fighting is ethnic, with no real focus on tourists — we're considered valuable here, and a street in New York or Port Moresby is a thousand times more dangerous on any given night. We wouldn't have left Bali over unrest in Sulawesi. It comes down to the same principle: the world is a dangerous place, know that, but don't let it paralyze you.

Politically, though, we probably need to leave — for the sake of the crew's families, and our international reputation. So I'm torn between playing politics and trusting that things really are all right.

A dive in the afternoon on a shallow reef — I film polyps and sea anemones with their clownfish tenants. Then out to a pass — a nice eagle ray, a crocodilefish, though I run low on battery. A gray reef shark, and since Konrad Lorenz is very much on my mind these days, some

behavioral study of the fish themselves — two angelfish squaring off, the ever-territorial titan triggerfish.

A whole underwater ballet of shapes.

We watch a Saturday-night movie aboard the RVH — a thriller that keeps everyone on edge.

June 11, 2000

A magic day, under the sign of the cetacean nation — a pod lets us into their world for three hours.

Back on the ship, sun-baked, I lie on top of Nemo's in a happy daze.

I cook dinner, Sunday-night speeches. Lately I've taken to raising a toast at random and waiting — often that same toast becomes the next one the table proposes on its own.

I'm deep into Konrad Lorenz's book on aggression — fitting, given the circumstances. He starts with the behavior of reef fish, and I can't help reading it as an analogy for the ship. We're twelve animals in a tank. We've risen above pure animal instinct, but that instinct still runs so deep in us that even wanting to escape it doesn't free you — you're cornered by it, pulled back down out of the clouds. I've been wrestling with that lately. Luckily the dolphins recharge me. What a coincidence that they show up exactly when, for the first time in days, I'm actually free and available. I feel scanned, somehow, lifted back to a higher register of being. My spirit's taken a beating lately, attacked and a little wounded — all I could do was rest and let it heal. A warrior, a peaceful warrior, pushed to react, when what I want is to consciously choose to act.

I recognize the power of memes and ideas planted by an outside mind — Johnny's work here. He might have miscalculated a little this time, giving out information a

bit ahead of where the foundation could hold it. His focus on history, and on Eros holding it all together, gets picked up intellectually by Brad, who tries to reason his way around something that can really only be reached through the different energies themselves. Johnny sees it as a total-systems view; I see a few of his memes getting copied and slightly misused, taken out of their context. All fascinating, honestly, but it takes a lot to absorb without cracking somewhere.

Expansion only really works when the mind and body can hold it without tipping into self-destruction. Man survives, obviously, and eventually has to circle back to basics. I also see that unless a few people are actually pointed in the same evolutionary direction, it's hard to move forward together at all.

There's a tendency to blow facts wildly out of proportion, without ever really working through the actual situation — relying instead on a handful of words and half-facts to construct an entire private narrative.

A whole argument with Brad, where he assumes the worst and plans around it, while I try to hold both sides and weigh them fairly. It could go worse. It could also go better. So I buy time, and make decisions with both possibilities in mind. He wants to tell Gaie I'm an incompetent expedition leader, and once he's loaded a few of these grievances, he just keeps firing them without much room for reason. His mind's made up, and his pride won't let him walk it back and admit he might be wrong. I'll need to watch my back a little going forward. I can't quite tell if it's some kind of power play, or if he's genuinely frightened by the situation and can't admit it, being who he is. I hope, and mostly believe, he'll grow past it, once he's willing to loosen his grip on being the smartest person in the room.

Regardless, we're safe, healthy, and mostly still sane.

A group heads out to Simbo for the day, coming back thrilled — but they bring news that a man was killed in town last night, and there's now a curfew in Gizo. Some nervousness aboard, especially from Brad.

June 12, 2000

A public holiday — banks, Telikom, and stores all shut, no chance to communicate. Last night's rumor is confirmed: a speedboat came in from Bougainville early yesterday and shot a Malaitan man dead at 5 a.m. — armed men, in and out, job done, gone. The final straw, it seems.

Sam calls — she'll arrive tomorrow morning on the first flight from Munda.

We try communicating from the Gizo Hotel, but the lines are still down.

The decision is made: we leave as soon as possible. We're still waiting on Eddie's passport, and without it he can't sail with us.

The study of group dynamics never really ends. The power struggles, and the games that come with them, are sometimes hard to bear. Brad, consciously or not, has been pushing against my role as leader — as second in command, pressing his views hard. Healthy, to a point, but he's stopped listening to the other side of things.

There's some pairing off happening now, subgroups working independently of each other.

There's a clear conflict between Brad and me, and I don't know quite how to resolve it, or whether it can be resolved at all. Like two fish sharing a tank, guarding their territory — or maybe fighting is the better word, though I don't want to fight. Under pressure, though, you either push back or withdraw, since talk alone

doesn't really resolve anything, only buys time. So I find myself in an odd position — watching my own emotions, staying in control, but unable to bring the other person to see what's actually happening. So the attacker goes looking for more allies to his cause. Good tactics, maybe, but it lacks vision — humanity reduced to its most animal stage. And I'm forced to come down and defend my own territory in turn. My opponent, feeling somewhat helpless, appeals to some higher authority to try to pressure his "rival." The rival lets the game play out, since it's a dead end either way. If two fish in a tank can't find peace — real, internal peace — one of them eventually has to give way. And I don't want to fight to the death over this. I can live with tension. But it costs energy that could go toward better things. And the real danger is that my opponent, in this case, is working purely from intellect, without any intuition to balance it.

Luckily I have unsuspected allies. The dolphins gave me a full charge again this morning — a high jump to say hello. Why would they suddenly leap right in front of my eyes, when they never do that any other time?

Their heads were spy-hopping in the water. The one that jumps is always the same individual — I couldn't tell you how I know that, but I do. Yesterday, Orla and I played with them for two hours, practically welcomed into the pod. I'd race the boat, and they'd ride the bow like mad. When I got in the water, they scanned me — I could hear it, loud. Then they went back to hunting. With the boat, I'd drive past, and they'd feed on fish scattering the other way, then come back for more riding. I'd cut the engine, and they'd surface all around us, ten meters out, unafraid. When I got excited, they'd jump — or did I get excited because they jumped? Felt synergetic either way. A few older ones held back for a while, close to the boat, spy-hopping. After about two hours, another boat raced past, and they all scattered instantly, in a beautiful formation.

We caught up with them again later, and once more they let us in, riding the bow waves. I took it as a sign we were welcome — allowed to take part in their world, fishing and cruising alongside them. We headed to a small, uninhabited island afterward. I wanted to collect a few shells for the sea-people tribe dance. Snorkeling, juvenile reef fish in the shallows, mullet around a sandbar, a blacktip shark. I paddled a while through crystal-clear water, the whole reef laid bare beneath me — nudibranchs mating, jacks cruising the edge.

We continued to a sandy island, ringed entirely by beach. Couldn't resist a few photos. We stripped down, feeling oddly self-conscious still wearing clothes at all — like Adam and Eve in paradise. What, I wonder, is our apple?

Ultramarine sky, turquoise water, a turtle cruising the shallows, waves breaking on the reef, and the two of us, briefly arrested in time like some kind of god and goddess.

Another round of conflict back on board. Karen wants more transect data — temperature readings from every transect done since we arrived, requested two days before we've decided to leave, right as we're prepping the ship. Orla asks her, reasonably, why this wasn't collected while we were actually out there transecting — pointing out how ridiculous the timing is now. Karen bursts into tears. I ask her to just go collect the data, and we can deal with feelings afterward. Rich comes at me about it — "this is your fault too." I take it up with him on the bow. Karen's been given more slack on this ship than almost anyone, aside from Alison. She's had dedicated days, a whole team gathering data for her, and still acts like some overlooked, put-upon scientist, expecting to be served. She's lucky to have this platform at all, people doing the legwork for her. It's only fair the foundation's name, and the ship's, appear on the resulting paper. I try to calmly explain our position to Rich. She had two

weeks to collect a few temperature readings and didn't. Her own oversight isn't something that gets projected back onto the crew, or the ship. I set her straight, but she starts hunting for other things to complain about instead — has a go at Maik over something in the boatswain's locker. A pretty small, sad pattern. Territory again. We're raised in the West to compete, I suppose, but we're living in a microcosm out here. Better to get a grip on myself and move on — I'm not going to change human nature in a week. What I can do is keep watching, quietly, take notes, and see if some pattern eventually resolves itself, or teaches something worth learning.

Today at the Gizo Hotel, all the Peace Corps volunteers wait for their flight home, leaving the Solomons behind — cheeseburgers and fries, playing at being important at the front desk. I catch myself feeling sarcastic about it. We have a beer, read some of Jeff's poetry — lovely words, and I wish I'd had more time to talk with him. The name Tessler comes up again — seems to keep following me lately. Johnny mentioned him once. To be continued, apparently.

That night I organize our last two dives. First a night dive with Maik, Jesse, Alison, Brenda, and me leading — crabs, sleeping parrotfish, big sea slugs, sea cucumbers feeding, shrimp, polyps fully extended. A nice, mellow dive.

The second, early the next morning at 6 a.m., with Ferdi, Kirsten, Orla, and Brad.

June 13, 2000

Six a.m. wake-up, before dawn, for one last dive at "the Orla Wall" — must be our tenth time there. We reach it just as the sun pierces through behind the volcano. As we drop, the reef is quiet, still in its slow morning wake-up. We see one devil ray, then two, then six, moving in formation. A huge reef shark down at a hundred and

twenty feet, tuna, mackerel. By the dive's end the whole reef is wide awake and buzzing. A magic final dive.

The dolphins come by for a farewell visit, a few leaps just to let us know they're there. It rains; we collect rainwater eagerly, fresh water for dinner.

A talk with Dani in town reveals the real story from the other night — thirty men from Bougainville arrived armed with M16s, with a specific target in mind, and interrogated a Malaitan man. The town itself was never actually taken over; they left once the job was done.

We're busy in town — food, gasoline, diesel, batteries. I make it to the bank, communicate, and speak with immigration. Eddie won't be sailing with us; his passport could take another two weeks, since all the government offices in Honiara are running on skeleton crews, and none of the staff have been paid.

No beer in town, and the famous Friday disco is shut down for now.

After catching up on messages, a strat command — I run it without room for a thousand questions this time. I propose leaving Thursday morning, with the ship ready by noon tomorrow.

Rich meets two semi-stranded travelers in town and asks if we might take them to Rabaul. I check with everyone first — if anyone's uncomfortable with it, we won't do it, unless it becomes a genuine life-threatening situation, in which case it would be our duty regardless.

We reach the village by 8:00 p.m., sitting one last time on the straw mats, hosted by Casper. Tonight's a little less formal, though we still open with speeches — the community's running a bit late, our sudden departure giving them little time to prepare. Jesse plays a few songs, everyone clapping along. Casper picks up a guitar and plays a few "cowboy songs," as he calls them.

They perform a few comic dances about a heavysset white woman — a real departure from their traditional dances, very theatrical. Then the couples' dances begin: each man from our crew is invited by a single village girl, and each of our women by a single village man, and we all dance our hearts out in pairs.

Casper asks whether relationships are allowed aboard the ship. We talk about sexual freedom, and why it matters to us. He explains too that there are around six thousand resettled Gilbertese across the Solomons, and none of their communities have chiefs as such — decisions are made by the community's elders together. The younger generation is expected to follow; if they didn't, they'd effectively stop being Gilbertese, having lost "kastom," their culture at its root. By now, everyone's danced with at least ten different partners. After a good sweat, we call for a final dance, and I close with a short speech, explaining that we're leaving paradise — sorry for the short notice, but the political situation in the Solomons has grown too serious for us to stay longer. We carry the village in our hearts, and hope to see them again in 2002, when the ship is scheduled to return.

Then, the strange saga of the young woman: a canoe comes alongside around midnight, carrying one of the girls we'd danced with, asking for help. Her story pours out — her husband is trying to kill her, she says, and she's come to hide with us. Her parents are dead; she lives in Honiara.

It's clear right away she can't actually stay on the ship, so Rich and I head back to the village and return with "Chiefy" Casper and a young man. It turns out she's Casper's niece — her parents are very much alive, and her husband wasn't even there that night. They collect her, and when we reach the village, all the girls are waiting to hear the story — normally girls aren't allowed

to visit the ship at all, and she must have broken every rule in the book tonight.

It took real nerve to do what she did, and I respect her for it.

But we leave tomorrow, or the day after, and rest is badly needed. A clear night; we all fall asleep on deck.

June 14, 2000

A last trip into town, for communication, a few more vegetables and fruit, some goodbye hugs. I clear the ship with immigration by 11:00, customs by 11:30 — ship ready. I explain to the two Englishmen that unless they're truly stranded, we can't take them aboard; I suspect it's really more Rich's enthusiasm than theirs pushing the idea, though I'll admit the woman is striking, the sort of thing that can pull a man off course.

I say goodbye to Dani, and we wait half an hour on Alison, who's playing her games again. Back aboard, I collapse — it's been a struggle holding everything together, with challenges coming from every direction lately.

An informal comments-and-observations dinner. I mention wanting more time set aside for cetacean sightings, though I doubt it really lands. Brad cuts the conversation short — still playing his own game of power, ambitious and, when it comes down to it, ruthless about it. So much was revealed last night with the Gilbertese, and that might be the best lesson of all. I saw so much in those dances — a dance reveals a whole personality, the way a body moves telling you more than words ever could.

Voyage from the Solomons to Papua New Guinea

June 15, 2000

We should be in the thick of the southwest monsoon, but the winds are inconsistent — mild squalls, heavy rain, no real settled direction.

Departure day. Brad's out with a fever; Rich will pilot, with me guiding from the mast. We finish the last of the shipshaping, and I drive Eddie back into town, handing him letters of recommendation for the PNG consulate, a photo of the ship, and over a thousand Solomon dollars to help him reach Honiara, and possibly Rabaul, to rejoin us later.

Couldn't check a proper weather forecast, but with Eddie's mother's help I pick out some particularly strong betel nut for the voyage — got to honor Baudelaire now and then.

So: lime, a few leaves, and the best betel nut the market has to offer.

We set sail by 10:00, clear the Kennedy gap by 11:30, pass through the Ferguson Passage, and raise sail. Maik and Ferdi semi in charge — mates in training.

I run the midnight-to-four watch with Maik, Alison, and Kirsten. The eight-to-twelve is Sam, Orla, Jesse, and Karen. The four-to-eight is Rich, Steve, Ferdi, and Brenda.

I've got both my problem cases on this watch. Kirsten's seasick and skipping it entirely.

Alison starts right in with requests and complaints, arguing over everything, wearing a sour look the whole time. I set her straight early — I won't let her spoil this voyage.

Brad's completely out of commission, vomiting, low fever, hasn't been on deck at all. He pushed himself too hard and collapsed under it. Alison tends to him, though even there she can't just agree to something without arguing first — a pattern by now.

Brad should start antimalarial medication if he's not better by morning.

Right now we're hove to, ten miles off Simbo, drifting with the current. Every hour under motor costs us a hundred Solomon dollars in fuel alone — very much in our interest to sail instead.

On the seasickness front: Kirsten down, Sam not far behind, Brenda on her way down too. I take a rest myself, knowing it won't last — this feels less like running a watch and more like an actual voyage at this point. More experience under the belt, I suppose.

We heave to again around midnight, waiting on wind. The swells are huge but gentle, lightly rippled — too little wind to sail properly. A plank on the mainsail works loose; Rich fixes it during his watch, speaking with more authority lately, taking on more himself. Good — though he still sometimes lacks a feel for the sails. Not a natural with them yet.

June 16, 2000

The ship motors until 1:00 p.m. I cook lunch, fish, a solid meal. On my watch Kirsten's still out, not even showing up, and Alison plays the seasick card, though I suspect she isn't really — I don't push it. We start sailing around 2:00, eight knots to begin, building to a steady fifteen to twenty by late afternoon. Hooray, we're sailing properly now, making four knots. I stay up through the afternoon, my whole body tracking the wind, monitoring our course. Sail, Heraclitus, sail — I know you're happiest out here on the open water. I hear your conversation in

the rigging, not just creaks but something closer to voices.

I cast the fishing line, clean out the box. A dolphinfish passes but ignores the lure — we're probably just too slow. But Heraclitus, I'm proud of you, taking these high swells so gracefully, gliding rather than pounding through them, in real synergy with the sea. You make me feel safe. I find myself singing into the wind.

We cancel lab — no one shows up — so instead I keep a quiet thread of attention on my own breath, up on the bow. My breath feels free out here on the water, deep and slow, the ocean air like some elixir of youth. Orla's arms hold me through my naps; I don't sleep in long stretches, waking every couple of hours at least. Each moment of the day carries its own particular flavor.

Brad's still completely out. Rich runs the ship's meeting — the two of them not giving much ground lately. I don't mind them stepping into the authority a bit.

Pat Metheny in my ears, wind against my skin, hair, ears. I feel happy. What is it about the sea that makes me feel this free?

Can't sleep. Sam's seasick and a little unsteady. I help her through a tack; I ask her to start the engine, but she forgets the seacock, and no water comes out the exhaust. I shout for her to shut it down, go below with her to show her properly — though, I realize, there's no written procedure for starting the main engine. A trigger point worth fixing. I decide to keep it low-key for now, while making sure she understands what could have happened. I take over the tack myself, get us onto a good course, 320 degrees. By then it's 11:00 p.m., and I'm on watch again within the hour. Sleep just isn't coming.

Usually we keep two people free of watch duty — the captain, and the expedition leader. Right now the captain's entirely out of commission, only appearing on

deck for the first time at dinner. The expedition leader's running a watch as second mate. And the hardest watch on sleep, the midnight-to-four, at that.

In practice, I'm still the real captain here, letting a younger crew member play the part. Power can be a tricky thing — his ego got a real boost during Johnny, Gaie, and Lazer's visit, and for a while he ran things almost like a small dictatorship, the easiest way to run a ship, if not the most effective, since it leaves too little room for real freedom. But he'll learn, I'm sure of that.

Rich keeps pushing to take on more. When the two of them first started, I used to run every single dinner. Since we made Rich the Synesthesia manager, he's gradually handed dinners off to everyone else, and I find I'm barely running any myself anymore. Not sure if it's intentional, but an interesting thing to notice. The pull toward power is strange — for them it's a bit like being on stage. If they want to be the actors, fine by me, but decisions still run through me in the end.

Take a small example — a meme, really: the rule about wearing a T-shirt to meetings. Originally meant to signal a kind of respect, showing up clean for the occasion. Now it's degraded into a bare fact of a T-shirt, some people trying to get by with a towel instead, or skipping it altogether. A good example of an original meme decaying into a meaningless habit — just accepted as custom, without anyone really asking why anymore.

And it goes on. Watches too, just because that's how it's always been, without anyone questioning why — at that point the action becomes purely robotic. Certain customs just persist because they were already there.

Somewhere back in time there was probably some incident that led to a new rule — a man shouldn't strike a woman, say. At this stage in the ship's evolution, that particular rule feels almost obsolete on its face, though

the underlying reason for it can get lost entirely, buried under the habit itself.

June 17, 2000

We're sailing with today's modest wind, ten knots at most, the mainsail flapping often but still sailing. I work out that each hour under motor costs about twenty US dollars, so sailing saves real money. We head northwest, cruising at two knots.

Brad's back, up on deck, checking the route.

Acting class at 3:00 — gestures of revelation, effort patterns. I give Karen some feedback, and she bursts into tears; I'm the bad guy again, apparently. But I want to push the acting class toward something more than a few bodies giggling for an hour. Brad's even more demanding about it than I am. A balance needs striking somewhere.

The moon rises a glorious red; the sunset before it was deep red too, blood-red, the red of dreams.

Slowly settling into the midnight-to-four watch, since I've often stepped into other watches too, mostly to push the sailing along. It's all too easy to sit on deck doing nothing, but we're here to sail — especially those of us who talk big about long voyages. The real voyage is as much inward as outward, and how far a person actually travels is entirely up to them.

Sunday speeches on the general theme of time tonight — the open ocean does that to you, makes you reconsider it, gives you time to contemplate time itself.

Moonlight dances across the swells. Dance, light, dance. A sharp awareness of just how alive I feel.

A real sense of the privilege of simply being alive.

June 19, 2000

Good wind, we're sailing, the rigging singing its usual songs. Unfortunately, a couple of prima donnas on my watch keep undercutting the sea's own mystic pull — an attitude I can't take much more of. I'm done playing along; I've lost the humor in this particular comedy. I bring it up at strat command. I'm out of patience for Alison, and no amount of sweet, wide-eyed innocence is going to fix that anymore. Even the usual behavioral observation starts to feel tedious.

Rich calls a night out without checking with strat first — no big deal, but another small sign.

Sweet time with Orla, shooting stars, dreaming the dream on. I chew betel nut to stay awake for a sunrise, blood-red again.

June 20, 2000

A baby killer whale leaps high, chasing fish, playing — jumping higher each time, twisting, splashing. I'm half-dreaming it, and then someone shouts: whales! I open my eyes to a baleen whale surfacing right off the bow, five meters away. She surfaces twice more before sliding back into the depths. What a way to start a day — my dreams have been so vivid lately.

The rigging is unusually loud — conversations, songs, I sometimes feel like I'm sitting in the middle of a pod of dolphins.

A good lab session — attention on the breath, that certainty of life as water, fluid evolution. Forty-five minutes feels too short today, even as I notice the rest of the crew growing restless, muscles twitching, shifting. I remember once not being able to sit still for even twenty minutes. I keep my eyes lightly closed, heart beating steady, a quiet ringing in my ear. My attention stays

centered — like a kind of balancing act, any wobble from emotion or stray thought quietly recalibrated. The bow receives me well, calm ocean, silver swells. We're hove to; the wind's died.

More whales in the distance — six surfacing across a glassy sea, ripples of trance. A swim stop, playing at being part of mother ocean. Still reading Lorenz for the intellect, but the dreams are taking over more and more.

Hailstorms, a kind of tunnel, gliding through water, a whole documentary running behind my eyes — the ship in a tight maneuver, the rigging calling me back awake. I drift in a daze between two worlds. Sunset time.

Evening on deep blue water, more than three miles of ocean beneath us.

June 21, 2000

Another dream of dolphins — and there they are, off the stern. Rough-toothed dolphins, a group of four large adults surfacing in formation, others staying near the center while more circle around them. Twenty or more individuals in all. At the center, suddenly, a beak pushes a small dolphin up to the surface — probably a newborn's first breath, staying close to its mother afterward, its tail still soft, not yet firm. The bigger dolphins circle protectively before the whole group moves off north. We're hove to, and a few groups of four swim close by the ship. Once again, that strange direct link between my dreams and their arrival, almost like a summons. Cetacean nation, on my mind again. One of the most incredible wake-ups I've had.

Steve's pancakes for breakfast are a hit. Despite the constant, and probably necessary, bickering — a kind of pressure valve — morale stays good. I can't help laughing at the running commentary in the command room these days, the latest fixation being the coffee and

tea thermoses, endlessly swapped and refilled and argued over. How we're supposed to focus on the big questions facing humanity with all that going on, I honestly don't know. At dinner it's clear no subject comes up without someone taking the opposite side. Human nature, I suppose.

Around noon during our watch, the blow of dolphins following the ship — we're too slow right now to give them a proper bow wave.

Incredible lightning across the sky tonight, a real show of nature. Pouring rain — we collect what we can, and get thoroughly soaked doing it.

In the evening I put on a slideshow against the sails, my usual theme of the rise and decay of Western civilization's particular madness, focused on the ocean's beauty and the Heraclitus as witness, and platform, for change.

I run two projectors at once, keeping an image of the Earth steady while other images move around or emerge from it — enjoying the creative possibilities of image and sound together.

Every day now I pick up the accordion for a session. The notes are starting to flow more naturally, and even the ones I can't quite play seem to form themselves in my mind, filling in the gaps.

June 22, 2000

Storms, heavy with rain, surround us on all sides. Thunder rumbles directly overhead, a loud roar from the sky. Then it rains, and rains, and rains. Most of the night spent hove to, drifting north.

A hundred and twenty-five nautical miles from Rabaul now. Over the last four days the main engine's run only

forty-six minutes total, mostly just to help with a tack, since our mizzen sail is still out of commission.

In the brief lulls, fish boil the surface, flocks of birds diving over them — a flurry of action, then rain again, and again.

Two boobies have taken up residence on the mizzen mast, dropping their inevitable mess on deck — it's been a while since their white splatter last decorated the boards.

Acting class turns musical — the crew dancing, jamming, the band coming together properly now.

Konrad Lorenz still very much on my mind. I take a hard, honest look at myself, the animal in me, trying to observe my own behavior and act on it, before it acts on me instead. A process I started years ago, but with growing consistency lately.

Brad and I have a meeting with Alison. I tell her plainly I'm done with her games — if her attitude doesn't shift, she's off the ship. I just can't absorb it anymore.

Inside, though, there's real conflict. On a personal level I can handle her, mostly by simply tuning her out, but as mate, or expedition leader, everything in me says to let her go, firmly if needed. And yet I can't help seeing her as someone carrying real trauma, strange behavior that isn't really so strange once you understand it. She rose to the occasion beautifully while Gaie, Lazer, and Johnny were aboard, then slipped right back once they left.

For Thursday night we finish "The Unknown Island." In the heat of discussion, Kirsten insists she knows exactly who she is — "I know who I am, I'm Kirsten, and I know my own behavior" — and I can't let that pass without pushing back a little. Watching our actual behavior, it's clear we're all still very much reacting rather than acting.

June 23, 2000

What does chess have in common with Darwin's theory of evolution? Not much, probably, except that both are very much on my mind lately, through books and through the game itself. Brad and Jesse are deep in a chess match in the command room, five people watching, offering tactics and strategy. Evolution is a strategic game too — the fittest survive, sure, but the real question is knowing where "fit" even applies. What's the next evolutionary step, at least on some small, personal scale? Or is that just human arrogance dressing itself up as theory again?

Tonight I stay consciously quiet through comments and observations. Easy enough at first, while the conversation stays fixed on the coffee jugs. Survival aboard, I've come to think, belongs to whoever can hold on to their sense of humor — my own personal theory of shipboard survival. Lose that, and the mind tends to follow close behind. Love comes next, I think, though a few years ago I'd have put love first. Or maybe together they make some kind of synergetic recipe for making it through.

Best sailing of the trip today, six and a half knots. I play with the rigging, opening up more sail, trimming the foresail, easing the lazy jacks on the main, chasing that perfect curve. The indigo of the darkening sky doesn't feel threatening at all — it feels beautiful.

June 24, 2000

Saturday, the day before arrival. We enter St. George's Channel, clean the ship, jump naked into the deep blue.

New Ireland on one side of us, New Britain on the other. We enter at night, current with us, navigation demanding close attention. The new GPS has changed everything — new phrases entering the vocabulary.

What's the tracking? How fast are we going? More information at our fingertips than ever before.

Two ships pass close by, and our port running light fails. We improvise with a kerosene lamp and red gel. Rain pours; the deck gets another wash, clearing off the fearless boobies' droppings. We're averaging six knots.

I worry a little that Rich has fallen asleep, since he cooked the day before — one of those watch arrangements. But this isn't the moment for it; we need full attention. Brad's sound asleep too. I choose not to make a scene, and quietly get Ferdi lined up instead. On deck check, dolphins play at the bow, a trail of bioluminescence behind them, loud echolocation clicking away. I lie on the bow, rain falling on my cold skin, happy and a little high on it all.

I nap, and wake at sunrise to find the ship hove to. I ask why — we'd be arriving too early otherwise; we're still thirty miles out. The fishing line's tangled in the prop. I go in to clear it, and swimming back against the current, spot a twelve-foot shark heading straight for me from below, two rainbow runners at its side. I climb aboard fast. When I put my face back in the water, it's already gone.

June 25, 2000

We approach Rabaul. The volcano's fuming, gray smoke drifting up into the clouds, casting a haze over the distance. I'm excited. As we near it, Brad hesitates, talking about anchoring instead at Kokopo, a town ten miles off.

My heart's pounding — not from turning back, but because I don't actually see the volcano as any real threat, just some distant smoke and a whiff of sulfur. This could make one of the great final approaches of the whole voyage. But then a meeting with Rich, and once

again I find myself pinned down in my own role, my opinions challenged in roundabout ways.

"You should be the one saying we should turn back — safety first," and so on. I give in. Brad then wants the boat lowered, fixated on one particular spot even though depth and distance both check out fine. From the top of the mast I direct the approach, watching dolphins leap in the distance.

We drop anchor after a fairly laborious approach; it holds. I decide to head into Rabaul, ostensibly to clear us in, but really just to get closer to the volcano and check for smoke over the anchorage we're considering.

I change twenty dollars at a shop, catch a minibus into Rabaul — the drive is stunning, dolphins visible in a nearby bay along the way. We pass close to Vulcan, the volcano responsible for Rabaul's destruction back in September '94. Both it and its sister crater erupted after an earthquake — Vulcan for eight days, but Tavurvur stayed active for months afterward. The town collapsed under the weight of ash and mudslides; a meter of stone once covered the harbor.

Vulcan itself takes my breath away. All I can think about is climbing it — adventure in the blood.

The road cuts through old mudflow, and all along it, Japanese tunnels from the Second World War.

Port authorities are closed for the day. The harbor looks fine, a little mist over the eastern side.

It's been steaming since '94, bigger puffs after rain. The smell of sulfur hits the nostrils at first, but after an hour the mind stops registering it entirely.

I drive back, calm now. The small boat picks me up, and a pod of bottlenose dolphins surfaces a meter away — they've been hanging around the ship for over an hour

already. We cut the engine and watch them for fifteen minutes.

The generator's been down for two days — the water pump blew. Ferdi and Rich spend the day, and most of the night, fixing the deck generator, finally succeeding around 2 a.m. In the meantime we're in a tight spot — I switch off every breaker on the panel, and we run on kerosene lamps, personal flashlights suddenly in heavy demand.

Chess becomes the favorite pastime aboard. Jesse and Brad play late into the night.

June 26, 2000

After a meeting, we decide to move into Rabaul proper. By 10:00 we're underway. Maik and I take the small boat out for photos and film — the scene is wild, the volcano fuming beautifully, and I get some great shots, getting as close as feels safe. Majestic.

Vulcan makes for a lunar backdrop; I picture Rich climbing out of one of its craters shouting some frustrated line about a stuck engine part, wrench in his greasy hand, straight out of a film. Dolphins play in the distance. We anchor by 1:00.

We wait all afternoon for quarantine to show up. By 6:00 it's clear they won't. I spend the afternoon watching chess games, one ear on the radio. That night, bubbles rise up out of the sea.

I wake at dawn, waiting on a radio call.

June 27, 2000

I pick up the quarantine officer, and he clears us. I drive into town — the custom office staff sit quietly on the pavement, waiting for the boss to arrive and open up.

The agent drops me at the bank, but my card won't work.

I clear customs, but I'm told I'll need to go to Kokopo for immigration.

The harbor master asks us to move to the east side of the bay, but the volcano's still puffing hard, and I ask why we wouldn't just anchor back at Kokopo instead.

I make a quick decision to move the ship right away. By 11:00 we raise anchor; I take the small boat out for a few shots with Vulcan in the background, thinking there's no better backdrop anywhere for a fire dance. Dolphins ride the bow for a moment.

The Beehives, two rock islets, stand like paired guardians over Simpson Harbour.

We're anchored again by 2:30.

Then the immigration office — housed in the revenue building, though they can't actually issue a visa; they're out of the right stamp. They suggest mailing the passport in, a three-week process.

Karen, Brenda, and Charlie need to leave as soon as possible. They ask me to write a letter of explanation.

Right now we're semi-illegal in the country, and without proper visas, at the mercy of whoever's enforcing the rules that day.

Riversong's in town; I meet her around 5:00. She's beautiful, and I can already see the crew going soft around her.

Jesse and Steve run a beer supply mission. I advise everyone against going ashore at night — customs assures me it's fine, but I know tribal tensions can spread unpredictably into other areas.

I spend the evening writing a careful letter to immigration — the wording matters. I'd rather not go to

Port Moresby unless truly necessary. I propose clearing here, paying whatever fees are owed, and getting the passports properly stamped once we reach Kavieng.

June 28, 2000

A huge dark cloud of ash rises from the volcano's cone. The sky slowly puts on its daytime colors, smoke trailing west.

The sun rises; ash falls like snow across the harbor.

A mystical kind of fire. Even the dogs seem to bark a little louder this morning. The ship's still asleep. A moment of contemplation on the earth's raw power — the reminder that our whole spaceship is really just a ball of fire wrapped in a thin crust, where life decided to take its chance, simply because it could. Evolution remains the best game in town. Everything's permitted, not everything survives. Like a canvas — colors, shapes, smells all blending into the most striking diversity — and from a human point of view, it stretches only as far as the senses allow. The intellect built language to push that boundary further, though the more you learn, the more you realize how little is actually known.

As a kid, one of my heroes was a volcanologist, Haroun Tazieff — I collected his books, and now here I am, in the middle of a major volcanic center. The harbor's ringed by five volcanoes, the last major eruption barely six years back. Cruising the area, you understand it won't be the last one either — a kind of latent threat hanging over the whole place.

Despite the natural wonder of it all, today has to be about politics — visas, the priority.

Rich fixes the generator, and Riversong's brought the desalinators parts with her — we might be back at full strength again soon.

My new plan is to run adventure expeditions solo first, to build a kind of longing that eventually spreads through the crew. We have these opportunities now; better to take them while we can. I know too well they don't come around twice. As Heraclitus said, you never step in the same river twice. Obvious, but easy to forget.

June 29, 2000

Six a.m., off to Port Moresby. All I hear is how dangerous the place supposedly is — always a matter of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. I catch a ride with Charlie.

We fly over New Britain, stopping at Hoskins — jungle stretching in every direction, reef clearly visible below, and I find myself hoping for whales. My head's glued to the window the whole way, playing at being some kind of space cowboy, a planetary mind for the future.

We cross ridges of untouched forest, no roads at all, just wilderness, then cloud. The bay at Port Moresby is stunning — reefs, atolls, inhabited islands scattered below.

The moment we land, I race for immigration and secure a visa for Charlie. The officer there is genuinely helpful — I leave the passport with him and can collect it in the morning. We end up talking about the different cultures here, and the Wantok system — it's very much about who you know.

I hug Charlie goodbye and check into a hotel. The city's reputation precedes it — prices are steep, a hundred and forty kina a night for not much of a room.

I take a taxi tour of town, stopping at Koki Market, curious what the local catch looks like — mud crabs, lobster, mackerel. Every face here seems to represent a different ethnic group. A stilt village sits right on the water's edge, and the neighborhood feels genuinely

tense — I catch a couple of men eyeing me the moment they notice me. The driver edges closer without quite saying "let's hurry," though that's clearly what he means. He's uneasy. I get a few photos and we move on toward the port, a busy stretch of docks.

We drive through some rough neighborhoods, into the business district, past the parliament building. By dark we're back at the hotel — security is serious here, barbed wire everywhere. But a quarter million people call this city home, and most of them aren't mugged on any given day. Rampant unemployment draws people in from the countryside chasing some promise of easy money, and some of them end up as what's locally called "rascals."

I flip on the television — news of Fiji, a political scandal in Germany, European football, unrest in the Moluccas, then straight into soap operas and the manufactured pop-star machinery of MTV. Sad, if that's what passes for role models these days.

A knock at the door — hotel security, big red-stained smile from years of betel-nut chewing, offering me "a good girl, PNG has good girls." I decline. He asks for a cigarette instead. Meanwhile some celebrity gets interviewed on television, married and divorced within days of each other, posing for a magazine spread for a million dollars. Goodnight.

June 30, 2000

An early breakfast, then to the airport to collect the passport — I spend an hour chatting with the "boss" there while getting the first stamps sorted. Next, the immigration office out in Waigani, where I find a room full of expats complaining about days-long delays with nothing to show for it. I get to the counter, introduce myself, ask for the supervisor by name, and fill out what feels like a thousand forms. By now I know my own

birthdate, middle name, and passport expiration by heart. There's a fee, naturally, payable clear across town at the revenue office, so I race there, pay it, and race back before the lunchtime gong sounds. My driver's a bit of a madman, but a good one.

That leaves two hours for the national museum — another mad dash across town with the same driver.

Then, finally, a slower stroll through the museum itself. Fascinating stuff — fishhooks made from seashells, remarkably close to modern lures, but over ten thousand years old. Shark-calling rattles made from coconut shells strung on vine, the vibration drawing sharks in. A delicately carved wooden float with rope and loops, more shell rattles attached — the shark swims through, and unable to reverse, tires itself out and gets hauled onto the canoe.

Next, the Lapita pottery trade — spreading from Samoa and Fiji throughout the Solomons and Papua New Guinea, with excavations right off Rabaul, on Watom Island, confirming the connections.

So many distinct styles of sailing canoe, too.

I spend some time in the painting gallery, still a fairly new medium for Papuan artists.

Out in the courtyard, a bird of paradise lands on my hand and starts stealing my pens, one after another, a whole little game of hide and seek. He's clearly hooked, and keeps coming back for more.

I buy three books for Nemo's, one a beautiful record of the Rockefeller expedition. Then it's back to the race for immigration — a lift from a gardener who happens to know someone in the office. It's technically closed to the public, but I get waved in, chewing betel nut with the "boss" while they finish the paperwork, talking culture the whole time. By 2:20 the passport's in my hands, a few more signatures still needed. Then the sprint of a

lifetime: the 3:00 flight back to Rabaul is fully booked, but I might still make standby. I check out of the hotel in two minutes flat, race to catch the international flight first to hand Brenda her passport with a quick hug, then sprint across the airport to the departure hall, straight to the gate. A man with a walkie-talkie confirms one last seat is open. I'm on my way back to Rabaul in under thirty-six hours total. A small miracle.

The flight back is gorgeous — a double rainbow over the clouds, reef visible on the water below, clouds stacked on clouds.

Back on board in time for dinner.

Chapter Five

Rabaul, New Britain, Papua New Guinea

July 1, 2000

Saturday. The ship dives again — we drop on the reef nearby, a cable off Kokopo. The reefs feel different here; plenty of new species. Nudibranchs dot the reef, a cowry shell hides under a ledge, schools of fusiliers patrol the reef top.

In the afternoon, Orla and I visit the Kokopo museum — mostly World War Two relics, though I spot an interesting obsidian spearhead that came from Lou Island, near Manus.

The museum's a little run-down, but some masks from the Baining culture hold my attention, along with the trees standing majestic in the garden.

I keep coming back to the images from the museum in Port Moresby — the Motu people once ran expeditions called the Hiri, in sailing canoes called lakatoi, carrying pottery loaded with sago, trading along the coast. Now the tradition survives only as part of a sponsored cultural show.

A huge part of PNG culture: old warfare transferred into dance. It's always a competition, each tribe trying to outdo the next, so you see an evolution toward the spectacular — ever more color, bigger headdresses, fancier costumes. Far removed from the real warfare of the Dani people in the highlands. Only the medicine man, the shaman, was ever fully "done up" for real. But at least the art survives, even as some of the original meaning fades.

Kombong'abe is the woman's spirit who gives life.

Iyatam is the fisherman's call.

We have a beer at the beach hut bar, the local hangout for most of the expat community. We meet the radio station's DJ and technician, and talk culture — the wantok system, where who you know is what gets you anywhere.

The manager of the Coca-Cola factory, an obnoxious, racist Canadian, grates on my nerves. Ashamed to be near him, I take a walk on the beach instead of starting anything. The locals quietly change tables.

A sailing canoe heads for shore, a man from Ninigo Island at the helm. We discover we know some of the same people — Bob turns out to be his brother-in-law, the same Bob we met and dove with back at Hermit Island, who taught us so much about fishing there. A nice coincidence.

A happy sight — sailing canoes are rare these days.

July 2, 2000

We catch a ride in the back of a pickup truck to a village inland, where there's a church fete underway. The sermon is loud and wild; a group of feathered men come forward for the sacrament. I sit on the grass chewing betel nut, gathering a small crowd — white men rarely chew, and we must look comical, spitting the juice out with all the grace of a newborn learning to walk. No practice at all, clearly. There's singing under a frangipani tree, eagles soaring over the valley.

Vulcan doesn't give itself up easily — each footstep on the ash sends up its own little cloud.

A man and three boys shout out, "Where are you going?" as we pass, halfway up the crater's steep slope. Slings hang around their necks, along with the inevitable

woven pandanus baskets full of betel nut. I've yet to meet a single person here who doesn't chew.

"Shooting birds?" They nod. No need for many words out here — questions get answered with a look, a small gesture.

"Can we come with you?"

"Sure."

Our little group climbs together. The sun beats down; the breeze will find us near the top. Huge crevasses make the path treacherous, deep ravines cutting across it. Vulcan demands sweat for passage — a real rite.

"Have you ever reached the top?"

"No — this is the first time."

The locals are genuinely afraid of Vulcan, understandably — in '94 the region lost its finest city, thousands left homeless, buried under three meters of ash. The volcano raged for eight days before finally settling.

We reach the crater rim, out of breath from the climb, but also from the sight itself — a lunar landscape. We could easily be on another planet, if not for the view over Simpson Harbour and Matupit Island. Vulcan's sister crater still puffs smoke, a trail of sulfur staining the sea yellow.

I walk the crater's rim, feeling like a real explorer. We start racing down the dusty slope, kicking up a trail behind us. The kids keep collecting pebbles for their slings, laughing, and we all shout up at the sky with our loudest voices. A wild run. We reach a few old vents, where Vulcan once let loose its fury.

Now and then we have to leap across crevasses. I mark my face with ash, a kind of mask from the earth itself. We reach the bottom covered in dust, full of life, full of

dreams, bonded by the whole adventure — friends for an afternoon, living on afterward only in memory.

Waiting along the road, eating the dust of passing cars, one finally stops — David, a health officer from the highlands, on holiday around PNG.

Back in time for our pickup, and Sunday dinner.

July 3, 2000

The day starts with a strat command meeting — schedules, route, communication, people, finance, diving, and time off.

I'll take a few days to explore the area on my own.

I race to the bank, then clear customs, crew arrivals and departures.

I pay the quarantine fee and spend over an hour talking with the officer about ballast water — ships arriving with foreign water aboard introduce new bacteria, algae, fish eggs, all competing with local species. I reassure him we don't carry ballast water.

I catch a ride to Tavui Point, once the site of a Japanese submarine base during the war — a steep drop-off right off the cliff, ninety degrees down to three hundred meters, deep enough for a sub to hide.

I meet the owner of a small resort there and plan to come back the next morning with Orla.

Spinner dolphins cruise by, fifty meters offshore. The beach itself drops off just ten meters out.

July 4, 2000

We load the small boat with tanks and dive gear and head for the sub base. David drives us there; we'll meet

again the next day for a trip to the Duke of York Islands, where a ceremony's supposed to take place.

As soon as we arrive at the resort, we collapse onto the first real bed we've seen in six months. Then we explore the drop-off, swimming what must be close to a mile along the rocky shore — a ninety-degree wall, schools of rainbow runners, spadefish, tuna patrolling the reef.

July 5, 2000

Dolphins break the surface, spinning and spinning like small sea-children, playing in the rising sun, and something in me plays right along with them, simply happy. I get in the water, not really to see them but just to be part of the element — I know they're there. Schools of fusiliers race past. The sun hasn't fully risen yet. Water flows over my skin. Free — I am free.

We reach the Rabaul market by 7:30. Piles of yam and sweet potato, stand after stand of betel nut. Everyone chews; the pavement everywhere is stained red with spit. No one over thirty seems to have healthy teeth left, and the older men pound the nuts in a mortar and swallow the juice straight. Like tobacco, once meant as a ritual of peace and celebration, it's become purely commercial now, and everyone's hooked.

I photograph faces and vegetables, trying to cover as much of the market as I can.

We meet David in Kokopo and hire a boat. Alison, from a village on the Duke of York, comes with us. David finds an excuse not to join — mostly, I suspect, because he can't swim. The islands are pristine — turquoise lagoons, steep drop-offs, a protective fringing reef, dolphins in the channels, canoes everywhere. Women gathering firewood, men fishing, kids four or five to a canoe, screaming and laughing as they go.

We pass through the old domain of Queen Emma — she certainly knew how to pick a paradise.

We arrive at the village, greeted by the smiling faces of sun-bleached kids. No electricity here, transport by foot or water buffalo, thatched huts. We stroll the beach, fringed by reef, white sand, old coral mingling with the trees.

We sit on a mat and wait for the ceremony to begin — palm leaves already laid out on the ground. I chew betel nut alongside a girl who shows me a straight tattooed line down the right side of her face, marking her clan. She shows me shell money too, still widely used across the islands — they don't even bother with kina among themselves, only when trading with Rabaul.

Then the food arrives. First a whole pig, then a three-foot pile of baked sweet potato wrapped in banana leaf and cooked in a stone oven, then another pig, and another. Coconuts on bamboo skewers, decorated with jungle leaves. More pigs still. People from different clans keep arriving, men and women seated separately. The immediate family of the deceased have their faces painted black with ash, hair dyed the same, dressed head to toe in black. More pigs arrive. Tinned fish, rice, still more pigs — fourteen in total, laid out in a row.

Perhaps five hundred people from different clans gather in all, some announcing themselves from a distance with their own songs, carrying more food, baskets of shell money. Once every clan has arrived, the chiefs sit together in the middle to begin negotiations, betel nut never far from hand. Meanwhile, others circulate, handing out betel nut to everyone present — soon five hundred people are chewing and spitting everywhere, myself included. I greet the main chief, overseer of the kastom, making sure everything follows tradition correctly, directing where each pig is placed, giving instructions constantly.

Speeches follow — the chief of police, then a priest offering a prayer, though Christianity's hold here is clearly thin; the local church stands damaged, never repaired.

I find a good spot to photograph the whole event.

The Tambuan chief arrives with a white feather in his hair, inspecting the arrangement. Then the division of goods begins — palm leaves laid out as dividers, each person coming forward to break off pieces of shell money and place their share. It moves fast; the fourteen pigs get butchered and divided at incredible speed. Food gets handed out, and everyone starts eating. I sit beside the chief, who keeps smiling, entirely toothless.

We ride back through the rain, spotting more dolphins along the way. The rain hits hard, the sea swells, and soon we're surfing the waves outright. Flying fish keep leaping as we cut through the strait. We stop for fuel; ten canoes head home ahead of dark, loaded down with firewood.

We reach the sub base after nightfall and order a huge T-bone steak. The owner joins us at the table — he's just bought the place. He used to run a liveaboard dive boat, until two people were taken by sharks one night, during some accident with a small boat.

We fall asleep like royalty on our huge bed.

July 6, 2000

5:45 a.m. — dolphins cruise by, the sea a perfect glassy calm. I dive alone, for the first time in years. I drop onto the wall; three eagle rays pass in formation, inches away. A curious gray reef shark keeps circling to inspect me. The dolphins aren't far — I can hear them. Huge mackerel drift past. I drop deeper, to a hundred and thirty feet, into a darker blue, surrounded by rainbow runners, a school of tuna passing, fusiliers along the

wall, Napoleon wrasse, groupers, a few barracuda. Magic light — alone, but never quite alone down there. I finish the dive right at the reef's edge, sucking the tank completely dry — an hour and a half alone with the ocean.

We take a long walk along the beach, several miles, feet falling into a kind of trance. We pass villages, small bays. I snorkel with some local kids, finding a new species of small creamy-white goby, collecting shells along dark, black sand. I focus on the tideline — small flounders, crabs. I spot an olive shell feeding on a brittle star. I follow the edge for a while.

We stop with a full view of Watom Island, where a German missionary once excavated Lapita pottery buried under five meters of volcanic ash. More dolphins pass.

We're seven miles from the sub base by now.

A late-afternoon dive on the wall — at a hundred and forty feet, three mobula rays glide with the current. Tuna, mackerel, rainbow runners, a whole parade of fish. The gray reef shark's still around. A spectacular landscape, coral formations rising like cathedral spires to ninety feet. Heaven.

July 7, 2000

A magic dive in a wild pass, a three-knot current shooting straight out to sea. We hold onto the reef for dear life. Schools of giant batfish, emperors, sweetlips, two huge Napoleon wrasse, groupers — a whole dance of big fish, more than I've seen in years. A ray cruises by; the current is fierce. We take shelter behind boulders, and I lie flat on the sand to watch the parade go by.

We surface entranced.

I'm admitted into the men's secret society of the Duke of York Islands.

Sitting among the Tambuan, the old men who hold real power here, I chew betel nut properly for the first time — crack the shell, take out the bitter fruit, chew, spit the juice, bite into a mustard green dipped in lime. Now I belong, for the moment. All the chiefs have painted their faces red and white; they drink, smoke, chew, laugh, dance, shout. This is the men's secret society — the children are kept far away, and even the women can only watch from a hundred meters off.

Rolls of shell money on display, worth some four hundred US dollars — the bank of the Tambuan, visible wealth.

It's essentially an organized system of tribute the men hold over the rest of the community.

The belief is that the Tambuan, or duk duk, carry a power that can kill — only the initiated may approach. So women, children, and uninitiated men keep their distance, at least fifty meters. But no Tambuan performs without payment; the secret society charges enormous sums in shell money for an appearance. Anyone who comes too close to the sacred grounds where the duk duk reside must pay a hundred kina. A complete monopoly, essentially.

The initiated men all have their faces painted brown and white. They vanish behind the bush, chewing leaves, drinking, chewing betel nut — getting high, in plain terms. I watch from the center, seated beside the initiated men who won't be performing tonight. The men shout, beat a wooden gong to summon the duk duk. Voices rise from the jungle, and he suddenly appears, led in by ten chanting men. The Tambuan dances for a minute or so, then vanishes again.

More drinking, more betel nut, more shouting, and the Tambuan returns — this time to collect payment.

The ceremony honors a clan chief who died back in April; after tonight, he'll formally be released from mourning. The duk duk kneels, and each man in turn steps forward to offer shell money. Once everyone's contributed, the money's collected, and the duk duk disappears again.

Now the elders pass leadership on to the next generation, striking the new leaders gently with leaves.

Then the food is divided, and I receive both shell money and a share of food, along with more betel nut. I keep chewing, feeling good by now. The duk duk return once more, with thirty musicians beating kundu drums, the local hand drum. I'm allowed to strike the skin myself, made from monitor lizard hide — a wonderful sound. The singing turns wild; the duk duk appear five separate times, dancing furiously each time. I shoot three rolls of film through the whole thing, trying not to miss a beat.

July 8, 2000

An early dive on a nearby reef — fields of porites, plenty of fish action. I get close enough to touch a sleeping turtle. Tuna pass overhead, and a massive school of snapper cruises the reef. Early morning light, divine.

Acting class on Vulcan.

A mad crew in the lab — Rich, Riversong, and Maik teamed up to prep the desalinator, working like maniacs all day and into the night. I have to ask for quiet at 2 a.m., when they're still banging and drilling away.

July 9, 2000

First dive with Steve and Riversong. We drop to twenty feet and simply dive, no formal exercises, just getting

comfortable in the water. Riversong's a little nervous but doing well.

More madness in the lab — the trio's at it again, third night running. They need to watch themselves; it's a weekend, and the constant noise is making the rest of the crew uncomfortable, the ship starting to feel like a madhouse. Some guilt-tripping toward anyone trying to relax instead of pitching in, and I end up arguing with Rich when I ask him to stop by 8:00 p.m.

July 10, 2000

While training Steve and Riversong underwater, a vision appears — something like a mermaid. A dugong. Unlike Florida and Caribbean manatees, with their flat, rounded tails, the dugong has evolved something closer to a dolphin's fluke — a slimmer body, faster movement. He comes close, checking us out. Sam's become the resident "dugong queen" — she's spotted him the last three dives running, while no one else managed to see him without her there.

The mad lab crew is at it again. An argument to get them to stop by dinnertime — "do whatever you want, just no noise." Three nights straight of banging until 2 or 3 in the morning. Riversong, Rich, and Maik growing steadily closer, under the watchful, jealous eye of Alison, who's been making faces about it for days.

July 11, 2000

We raise anchor in the morning and head for Rabaul. The volcano's quiet today.

We dock smoothly by 11:30, Brad taking my feedback seriously now — the team's really coming together.

Twenty-two hundred liters of diesel, two hundred liters of engine oil, four hundred liters of gasoline — just short

of two thousand dollars. We fill the water tanks too, and by 4:00 we're anchored beside the old yacht club.

I get a chance to walk through old Rabaul — what's left is mostly structural steel, everything else buried under ash.

Two hotels still operate among the ruins of the dead city; the driver nearly teared up showing me around. "And this is where the cafés were, here was the recording studio..."

An anchor dive with Jesse, a hundred and twenty feet down at the bottom of the harbor. The anchor's secure; I play with the ash on the bottom, kicking up clouds underwater — the same fluid patterns, I suppose, wherever you find them.

At 1 a.m., Brad comes back with James — something like PNG's version of a security contractor — who runs a company with over two hundred workers, delivering plantation wages by helicopter. Wild stories of dangerously low flying. He seems kind enough, though currently facing murder charges after a fight that killed a man. They talk rough, keep drinking, show off their special radios. A good time, all told. I drift off to sleep under the stars, with a light rain of volcanic ash falling.

July 12, 2000

The deck's covered in ash again, our feet stained black. An early dive leaves at 5:30 for the Beehives — along the way, we motor straight through drifts of floating pumice. We drop first into very shallow water, along a wall — the old reef here is entirely coated in ash, a coral cemetery. A few staghorn colonies are starting to recolonize. Not many fish, but perfect habitat for gobies in the rubble, and spectacular nudibranchs. Thick white sponge is taking over much of the substrate. I spot a green moray eighty feet down, tucked in a hole. Looking up, sunlight

piercing through drifting pumice is a striking sight. We dive in two groups, Rich leading one at such a pace I doubt they saw much of anything.

I run into town to communicate and sort out a solution for the camera. Luck's on our side — Elaine Soo, daughter of a Chinese businessman who holds the local monopoly on bread and most groceries, is flying to Australia on Friday. A rush of emails, to Gaie, Karen, letters prepared for Sony, immigration, one last bank trip.

Riversong had actually met her on the flight over, and stayed with her family while the ship was clearing in.

The drums are beating — the garamut in Jesse's hands, a smaller Kenyan drum with Orla. We climb partway up Vulcan's slope, the drumbeats echoing, our voices answered back by the crater itself.

I find a mud pool and start covering myself in it. Everyone follows, and we climb a small ash-covered rise, performing our own improvised ancient rites — twenty thousand years back, for a moment. I get properly wild, running barefoot over sharp volcanic stone. A caveman, screaming something primal, body loose and wild. The sun dries the mud into strange patterns across our skin.

We reach the mud bath proper, digging in deep enough that it nearly burns our feet — black mud, the black of the darkest night.

My voice takes a while to come back afterward. Words don't want to form. I don't push them.

July 13, 2000

A group heads out at 5:30 for the volcano excursion. I go into town to hand off the camera, communicate, clear the ship with customs — a hard deadline, since if we don't leave by 10:00 we're stuck another day. Somehow

the timing works out; I get Karen's address, hand Elaine the letters, cash, and camera.

We raise anchor by 10:30. Dolphins come to play at the bow, the volcano smoking behind us, flying fish everywhere. I cast three lines, adjusting the lures, but no luck — the fish seem to be mocking us again. We pass through a school of tuna without a single bite, a sailfish leaps in the distance, a few mackerel skip across the surface — still nothing.

As consolation, another pod of dolphins comes to ride the bow.

Ferdi takes his first solo watch, and the passage goes smoothly.

The approach to our anchorage is tricky — the Tolai villagers have hundreds of fish traps scattered across the bay, and we have to navigate carefully around them. We try anchoring three cables out, but our sixty-meter lead line doesn't even reach bottom.

Old-school now — we follow the coast, casting the lead line by hand. "Drop the anchor, a hundred and fifty feet, hard!" "Reverse on." "How's it look on radar? Watch the distances." "Roger."

I dive the anchor with Brad, finding the chain at a hundred and fifty feet, following it up a steep sandy slope to about a hundred and ten feet where it's properly dug in, then continuing up to fifty feet where the slope levels off — anemones with busy clownfish families, a few gobies, a striking little landscape. We head back toward the ship.

Strat command — I'll lead a diving expedition to Watom Island. Most of our systems are running properly again now; focus shifts to dive training, and some notes on our navigation and communication skills. Alison brings up more friction with the mates — I can barely stand to hear her name at this point, tired of dealing with it.

The coconut plantations glow gold in the evening light. Locals paddle out in canoes to see the black ship. Not much talking here generally — a look, a gesture, does the job. I notice how attached we are to words by comparison, sometimes almost fussy about them. Most of the crew grew up speaking English as a first language, and the few who didn't have to live with that gap.

We have a formal dinner, talking through our time here in Rabaul — the dugong, the duk duk, the diving, the volcano. A rich harvest of a stay.

July 14, 2000

Anchored two cables off Watom Island, a good view of it from the ship. A solid lab session in the morning, helping me recenter — these last few days have been packed, on every front. I know I'm on a demanding path, carrying real responsibility largely alone, learning how to lead without needing to argue every point.

We lower the beagle, sort out finances, hold a meeting on diving, get the mizzen sail ready, the engine running, food expedited.

I take Steve and Riversong on their third dive, along a sandy slope, black sand all around. After mask-clearing drills, buoyancy work, oral inflation practice, we cruise the sand — a flounder tracing the ripples, an extraordinary white nudibranch with red spots laying eggs. Steve's a natural; Riversong's steadily losing her fear of the water.

Maik joins for the dive.

July 15, 2000

6:00 a.m., off for an early dive. We stop by the Kuala Lodge resort to find the place still fast asleep. The owner mentions some wrecks he's sunk nearby, but unable to

find them, we dive a sandy slope instead — fields of sea stars, some species I've never seen before, gobies everywhere, shells scattered across the sand. I find six murex shells with long spines feeding on a sponge, and take three of them — the first time I've ever collected live shells from the sea, but I want to start a small collection aboard the Heraclitus, something to show kids.

A lone anemone with its resident clownfish family entertains us for a while. Sea urchins with phosphorescent blue spots, and fish sheltering among their spines, dot the sea floor. My BCD pockets fill up with shells, destined for our tribal sea-people theater piece.

Acting class once we're back — prepping for tonight's party. I volunteer to run the music, going through all my tapes. We decide to cross-dress for the occasion.

In the afternoon, a dive at an old wharf — a BP fuel station that's operated here for a decade. Thirteen meters down, huge pylons thick with marine life, lionfish everywhere. Surgeonfish, bannerfish, moorish idols schooling beneath the wharf; a moray hides between old cement bags; a few big jacks pass through. I drop down a sandy slope to a hundred and ten feet, finding the biggest gobies I've ever seen, twenty centimeters long, with their shrimp companions in tow. Rays everywhere.

Along the wharf, more structural remains host plenty of fish, schools of snappers. At least twenty tiger cowries scattered about, though I can't bring myself to take any. The pylons themselves are thick with oysters, soft coral, sponges — all kinds of fish tucked in among them.

We move to a nearby reef, healthy, crowded with clouds of cardinalfish nearly hiding the coral heads beneath them.

Rich's birthday party — time to get ready. I set up the boombox, we dress Synesthesia up for the occasion, turn the lab into a bar, and everyone puts on their best. Soft music, food, fruit punch.

One by one people disappear to transform into someone else entirely. I become a woman. In Bio, in front of the mirror, real theater unfolds. We bring Rich down, sit him in a chair, and parade past him one by one. The dance floor fills fast, and the second song is AC/DC's "Hells Bells" — everyone headbanging, the best party in a long while. I keep the music running and running, skinny-dipping breaks, a birthday cake, and a few unexpected sides of the crew revealed.

Synesthesia turns back into the mad dance floor it was built for, and the deck becomes the chill-out zone, cushions and kerosene lamps scattered around.

We wrap up by midnight.

July 16, 2000

5:30 wake-up for me, Rich, Maik, Jesse, Sam, Orla, and Ferdi — a diving expedition to Watom Island. Still wearing traces of last night's makeup and party scars. Passing the fish traps, we run into a pod of a hundred and fifty spinner dolphins. Takes us an hour to reach Watom.

First dive: the south side of Watom, a wall dropping to a hundred feet, thick with invertebrate growth, a school of unicornfish, wonderfully colorful, a few giant grouper. But it's really the landscape that takes your breath — cracks and crevasses, all encrusted with life, stingrays resting on the bottom, clouds of caesio raining down the wall face. The reef top, barely a foot deep in places, is covered with table coral, staghorn, porites, none of it bleached, all in perfect condition — the healthiest reef I've seen in years.

A huge Napoleon wrasse cruises past. The whole reef looks like it's barely been dived before.

Back at the beagle, garden eels feed along the sandy slope.

We dive in two teams, to avoid crowding underwater and give everyone proper time to decompress and unwind. We've brought along plenty of coffee.

We pass a village on the way and stop briefly to say hello — they look at us strangely, and I remember, too late, our smeared leftover party makeup. We must look like a group of lunatics. We move on.

Second dive: we drop onto a ledge sixty feet down — a healthy reef, cuttlefish, triangle butterflyfish, more caesio raining past. A "tongue" of reef extends out, plunging into deep blue; we reach a hundred and twenty feet, greeted by two entirely fearless gray reef sharks. Visibility's over a hundred feet, the wall thick with life. A majestic landscape.

Orla spots a stonefish, perfectly camouflaged, and right beside it a huge green moray peers out of its hole.

We continue along the coast and find a creek leading to a small cave — sparrows flitting in and out, a pool of pale blue water. We tie up to a tree and climb into the forest, reaching a huge cliff — volcanic island, but this cliff is limestone, encrusted with old coral and shells, a hundred feet high.

We all fall into a quiet, meditative mood, sitting on rocks or perched in trees, listening to the sound of the forest.

Third dive: starting from the cove, crevasses everywhere, deep ledges. A cave leads inward; I go as far as the light allows, though it clearly continues beyond that. We cross toward open water along a wall hung with giant sponges upside down. A big pufferfish peers through a hole, and we play a little hide-and-seek.

I slip into a lava tube at thirty feet and emerge from the wall at ninety. Visibility astonishing again, over a hundred feet — you can drift through crevasses, sunlight filtering down through table coral overhead from the surface. Magic. Shafts of light mark the way out through the reef, like some kind of monument.

We start heading back, dropping once more on the south side.

Fourth dive: a strong current running east. Ferdi and I drop to eighty feet — the fish are wild here. Giant barrel sponges everywhere, a turtle cruising past, a blacktip, groupers on every side, sweetlips, black snapper, batfish, clouds upon clouds of anthias. A huge mackerel makes a pass; a school of barracuda hangs just at the edge of visibility. A whole bustling city of fish, and the reef itself in excellent health.

One of the best dives of the entire trip.

Rain starts up as we head back, driving through the swells to the ship. We troll the whole way, but nothing bites. We weave carefully back through the maze of fish traps, catching our line once or twice. An incredible day.

Sunday speeches on childhood, for most people.

Art, and the limits of language — how do I describe the thousand shades of the sea, the whole symphony that runs through my mind on a beautiful reef, the shapes and dance of light and fish and thought together?

Voyage from Rabaul to Kavieng

July 17, 2000

Departure day for Kavieng. The beagle's hauled back up after performing beautifully these past weeks.

We get the ship shipshape, one last supply run from the village, I cook a curry for lunch, and by 11:30 we hold our departure meeting. Ferdi will stand as mate for the first time on a real passage. The wind's in the right direction, spirits high.

We raise anchor, thread carefully back through the fish traps, and suddenly dolphins appear from everywhere — huge leaps, mothers and calves riding the bow, clearly excited. Many swim in pairs, upside down, in wild, unmistakably erotic play — two younger ones cornering a female, riding along with her. Must be thirty of them at once. For fifteen minutes they keep it up, playful and openly sexual. We're not moving fast, but they easily keep pace. I climb down onto the bobstay chain to be closer.

For what turns out to be twenty minutes — though I lose all sense of time in it — I ride along with them. They keep coming from every direction, but I find myself connecting with one in particular, staying right alongside me the whole time. We look at each other. It feels endless, like I've never been anywhere else. A few turn quickly to sonar me, chattering constantly, noise all around. My whole body relaxes, just my hand on the chain keeping tension, holding the bow, my companion right there beside me. I could reach out and touch them, but I know instinctively that would be wrong — the thought barely crosses my mind. It goes on and on, well outside their usual routine. The moment I decide to climb back up, they all vanish instantly. I'm in heaven, high as anything, trying now to put into words something that really can't be described.

The wind, at a hundred and thirty degrees, is perfect. We're making good time, six knots, playing with the sails, adjusting the lazy jacks, the mizzen raised — the rigging singing again.

Twenty knots of wind on the sail, the Heraclitus, a happy ship, cruising through the night. The black ship gets away once more, kissing the darkness, dreaming toward the stars.

A jibe around 1 a.m., all hands on deck. The rigging holds safe, just a few metallic clanks from the galley.

I can't sleep — my ears stay wide awake, catching every footstep on deck, every creak in the rigging, every shift of the hull against the waves, every cry from the parrels, every word called out on watch. Rain hits the deck. A loud, mistimed tack, wrong commands called — we readjust.

Wild dreams. I'm some kind of samurai, stung by a beast hunting me, part of some worldwide scheme to hook people on adrenaline and fast, meaningless games. The beast knows me, is hunting me specifically. I need a sword; I need to kill it, or there'll be no rest.

Visions of men slumped in front of screens, helmets on, wired into chemical-fueled games, trading tapes back and forth, no one quite themselves anymore.

I take the four-to-eight watch — Kirsten's seasick, leaving just Ferdi and Orla. I steer with the wind seven points behind the beam, surfing each wave. A perfect course, five knots — twenty miles in four hours.

July 18, 2000

10:45 — I wake to "fifteen minutes to lab," pulled back from dreamland. Dolphins, a huge pod, silhouettes against a silvered sea, cruising at speed, leaping. We push lab back by fifteen minutes.

The wind drops; we heave to.

Another pod plays nearby, spin after spin, thoroughly worked up. We all sit and watch the show.

Meanwhile I'm reading Herman Melville's *Typee*, his romanticized account of four months spent in Polynesia, more than a century back.

Stuck for a theme for Tuesday night, Rich announces: "Love — tonight's theme is love."

Everyone goes quiet. Then the intellectual sparring begins, and we can't agree on anything. A few of my own riddles from the evening:

Love is scrubbing the heads after someone's emptied their stomach from seasickness.

Love is God.

Love is life.

Love is all and everything.

Love is knowing you're there.

Love doesn't exist.

Love is everywhere.

Love is the king of my heart.

Love is swimming in the deep ocean.

Love is love.

Love is the arms of a woman.

Love is the arms of a man.

Love is the full moon shining on the sails.

Love is me.

Love is you.

Love is we.

Love is eternity.

Love is infinity.

Love simply is.

Love should also mean writing letters to friends, something I've failed at completely — haven't written to a soul. Should be a priority once we reach Kavieng.

We're lucky to live this life aboard the Heraclitus, and it feels like a duty, in a sense, to share the adventure.

We're living a dream, but also keeping one alive. The world's going a little mad out there, and we've chosen the road of reason instead.

My mind stays with the dolphins. That ride on the bow keeps surfacing in my thoughts. I feel free.

July 19, 2000

On watch to cover for Kirsten, still seasick. Sun rising, and we're sailing, four knots, heading for Stephens Passage. We decide to push for it, aiming to reach the anchorage by 3:00.

On the chart it looks tight, but from the masthead it all makes sense. The area looks like it holds wild diving. I suggest heaving to and exploring the further passes instead, but strat decides otherwise, and I'm not in the mood to push it right now.

We enter the bay and set up for a dive right away — Ferdi's birthday today.

We drop into the channel, against a strong, very strong current, holding onto rocks. Then the parade begins — one giant barracuda first, then two, then three, then a whole school, each a meter and a half long, thirty of them. Then a school of a hundred smaller ones. A huge school of silver barracuda circles us. A school of big-eye trevally comes in to inspect. Mackerel, tuna, jacks, rainbow runners, sweetlips, snapper — it doesn't let up. The giant barracuda come within inches. We all hang on

to the bottom; anyone who rises even slightly gets swept off by the current.

On a ledge we spot a giant green moray.

We surface a little way from the small boat, but the current carries us the rest of the distance in under a minute.

July 20, 2000

A morning dive on a wall covered in sea fans. We drop into the channel — the fringing reef thick with hard coral. Around fifty feet, a vertical drop-off hung with giant fans. A blacktip cruises by; an Indian threadfin jack makes two passes. A local canoe checks whether we have permission to dive here — liveaboards visit regularly, and the villages have organized a system, each operator paying fees to a tourism bureau, later divided among the islands.

We decide to move the ship to Kavieng to clear in officially. Anchor up by noon, cruising past a string of pristine islands.

We anchor mid-harbor and clear in — the most relaxed customs process yet, all of three minutes. Brad and I head into town to restock cigarettes, and I pick up beer and wine for the crew.

We visit the Nusa Retreat Lodge, run by Nick, an Australian who's settled here — a hardcore surfer who made his money in real estate but fell for this place and started the business instead. Understated, tastefully done, Malagan carvings on the walls, charts, surfboards, seashells.

I meet Austin, and we talk fishing and reef rights for the area.

I stay on guard, snacking on a giant mud crab bought from one of the villagers.

The rest of the crew gets properly drunk and wild, tucked away in their own corner of paradise.

July 21, 2000

Frustrated at not finding anyone to tend an early dive, I head out alone, trolling around Nusa. I drop Kirsten at the market and land a fish almost immediately, a small barracuda. Alone on the small boat, a few canoes working a school of tuna nearby — I get a strike too, a lucky second catch of the day.

Back at the market, I buy twenty mud crabs and three real monsters — the small ones thirty toea each, the big ones fifteen kina.

The dive to Echuca Patch. I plot the position from the chart into the GPS, and we set off hunting for the seamount. A buoy marks a wreck resting in a hundred and ten feet of water; we follow the rise of the patch up to forty-five feet. The moment we drop in, we can hear the distinctive clicking of dolphins. The fish life is stunning, visibility over a hundred feet — six dogtooth tuna come within a few feet of us, huge barracuda beginning to school. Two-spot snapper hide among the table coral. Two turtles, remoras attached, glide off into open water. Spanish mackerel and rainbow runners keep passing through. Two Queensland groupers hover above a field of massive purple sea fans, some standing two and a half meters tall. Fusiliers start raining down around us. We swim into a school of one-meter barracuda, who politely make room for us.

We decompress at fifteen feet, a few more minutes of quiet joy — the kind of joy that doesn't allow for talking.

The sound of dolphins never leaves us the whole dive. On the surface, Karen spots a marlin jumping.

The rest of the crew's off in town to meet James, visiting from Rabaul — another round of the returning-drunken-

sailor routine, without much doubt. Lying on top of Nemo's, we hear music drifting over — traditional beats. For an hour, under a clear sky, we lie motionless, the rhythm settling into our minds.

I take the small boat closer. The music grows louder, and in a mangrove clearing, near two thatched huts, a group of men play bamboo drums alongside a guitar plugged into a speaker.

I sit on the ground near a freshly killed pig being divided among the players and dancers, each portion wrapped in leaves while the music keeps going. As custom demands, I chew some betel nut and smoke a "spear," the local dark tobacco.

Suddenly twelve dancers appear in full costume, shell money around their necks, leaves in hand, white mud markings across their skin. They sing and dance, voices rising, energy climbing — most of them clearly buzzed by now. Empty cans of SP, the local beer, pile up at the base of a nearby tree.

Steve shows up to collect me, and we sit together, wide-eyed. It's 1:30 in the morning by now — they've been dancing for forty minutes straight. A real privilege to witness. They'd traveled all the way from New Hanover, hired to welcome a film crew arriving at the airport.

Steve and I just sit, talk, and take it all in. I suspect, honestly, the dancers came partly for us.

"Now you have something to remember this evening by," someone says. And they're right — I carry the sound and movement of it in my head still.

July 22, 2000

For our dive we head to the west side of Nusa, paddling out over sea grass, a strong current running across the reef top. We drop to eighty feet. In two small caves I spot

a huge nurse shark resting, maybe two and a half meters long, heavy-bodied — one of his caudal fins cut clean off.

I get within a foot of him, watching quietly, admiring him. Something about him feels different, marked. I think he gets startled when three other divers block the cave entrance, and he leaves, unhurried.

I take Steve and Riversong on a training dive, murky water — emergency ascents, buddy breathing, mask removal. We come across an intact plane wreck along the way, fish gathered all around it — a crocodilefish, a stonefish, a clown triggerfish. A great dive.

Later, oddly hyper-aware, unable to move much, every sound, color, word, and inflection resonating strangely. I've been drinking hard, straight Johnnie Walker, nothing in my stomach. Talk of food with a Chinese businessman, a great guy — he once sent an expedition into the jungles of New Hanover to collect frogs; in seven days they caught twelve. "They were delicious," he says. Talk of conservation, dive spots, but mostly just culture.

July 23, 2000

A hard day. I was thoroughly, embarrassingly drunk last night. A gentle wake-up, first aid, a coconut.

In the afternoon, back to Echuca Patch — fish madness again. The highlight, an eagle ray passing directly over my head, close, three separate times during the dive. Big dogtooth tuna, monster jacks, the whole reef alive with fish. A mellow dive, just Orla and me, Ferdi tending as master of the boat.

That evening I cook mud crab for Sunday dinner, standing frozen, at a loss for words — still badly hungover, whiskey having thoroughly done me in. Still, I enjoy the speeches.

July 24, 2000

I meet with Austin, chairman of the island, at his house — his wife sewing on one side, him busy writing on the other. We sit and talk about the dives we've already done nearby, and he explains the significance of different sites.

One spot, he tells me, was once home to an old man who used to call sharks by name, having built a stone enclosure to keep one particular shark close. That shark was eventually caught by the Japanese; when it turned up on the dock, the local clan recognized it immediately and tried to return it to the water, believing it dead. It recovered, strong as ever — but never returned to that same spot again.

I tell Austin about the huge nurse shark I saw on a recent dive nearby, its lateral fin cut, allowing me to come within a foot of it, barely able to move, tucked into its small cave.

He'd like us to try to photograph it, if we can, to show the elders.

Echuca Patch, he tells me, has a local name — Kura Macan, "the floating island" — believed to hold real magic, coming alive at night. It's also where the ashes of ancestors are traditionally scattered into the sea.

More stories follow — moving reefs, old wars fought with the help of dolphins, dugongs, and sharks chasing off enemies.

"I know you might not believe me," he says, "but it's true — we have the church, but we also have the spirits."

We agree I'll make a public contribution to the community on Wednesday, during a meeting with the elders.

I paddle our canoe back to the ship, then take Steve and Riversong for a dive right around the hull — murky, barely two feet of visibility. We swap our gear out underwater, race to the boat, and squeeze in a twenty-minute dive on the plane wreck instead.

July 25, 2000

After the morning meeting, a dive with Steve, Riversong, and Ferdi off the north tip of Nusa. For the first time in days, visibility's good. We drop to thirty feet, heading out to sea along a gradual slope down to eighty feet. Around a huge barrel sponge, we play with resident shrimp.

Around fifty or sixty feet, under nearly every ledge, we spot lobster — I haven't seen this many in a single dive in years, more than fifty of them, all good eating size.

The supposedly rare spotted barramundi cod isn't rare here at all — we see five of them. A moray peeks from its hole. Schools of blue triggerfish hover along the edge, snappers and spadefish schooling nearby.

The reef top looks perfectly suited for a transect — good to know we can, if needed.

A talk with Brad — he's decided to go to the Mars conference after all, rather than let go of the dream entirely. The last thing I'd want is to watch him become one more dreamer who never follows through. Good on you, Brad. I think he'd have regretted skipping it for a long time. As Janis said, in a rare moment of wisdom, get it while you can. Go, Brad, go.

That night, an evening discussion on living coral reefs turns into something closer to environmental grandstanding — the bright-green rhetoric of unrealistic utopias, dumped fuel tanks and bottles blamed on some village chief, and so on. I get a little loud myself, trying to point out the hypocrisy sometimes buried in that kind of

talk, and try to clarify some misconceptions about what science actually is, and does.

The friction started earlier, when I pushed a bit too hard to get the transects finished quickly — read, apparently, as me just wanting to get the "science" out of the way. The opposite's true: I want to push the science further, using a genuinely scientific eye to actually observe the reef, rather than settling for a handful of completed transects and calling it done.

July 26, 2000

We rise at dawn, the sky waking in gold, the sea flat, mirroring the clouds above.

As we enter open water, I spot a fin — a dolphin, on its side, not moving. I pull him up, holding his head above the surface, checking for a pulse. Nothing. He's gone.

His blowhole stays closed; his open eyes stare back at me from somewhere past death.

I examine him carefully — fresh scarring all along his body, evidence of some struggle. Marks across his dorsal fin, pectoral fins, flukes, all around his torso. Either a fight, or he was caught in a net and released too late. Still quite fresh. I keep holding him, opening his mouth, pulling gently at his tongue, but there's nothing. A young male bottlenose.

Karen thinks we should bring him back to the ship, or find a fridge in town for a closer look. I don't think there's anything more to do now. I consider filming his body, but hold back — some instinct toward respect for the dead stopping me. I decide instead to tow him further out, into open water, holding his side fins and rostrum as we motor out. At some point I simply let go. We all sit in silence in the boat.

We stay in the water nearby for half an hour, just being present.

I'm not really focused, drifting in a kind of daze. On the ride back, I feel tears coming, and start to cry — not entirely sure why, except for the strange, heavy sense that someone has died.

After the morning meeting, I rush into town to call my mother, make sure everyone's all right. For some reason John Lilly comes to mind. I try, unsuccessfully, to get online. A tight knot sits in my chest all day; the urge to cry keeps returning. Something feels wrong.

On his way to drop Jesse off, someone hits the reef near the dock, and the outboard's prop falls into the water. We borrow local goggles and manage to retrieve it, then get towed back by one of the resort's boats.

Sam, heading up the science, goes out to set pins for our transect — we'd meant to finish one today, but the day had other plans.

I sleep in Nemo's, hoping for more insight in dreams. Another disturbed one instead — the ship carried off on some wild ride, a snake biting me mid-game. I can't quite make sense of any of it.

I wake up feeling strange, without having really accomplished much today — a mood that seems to have spread across the whole ship. Michel, wake up. We have to keep going.

Some men from the village stop by asking for fuel. They know me now as "the man who saw the shark" — the old spirit of the clan, they say, raised right there in the village, once helping fishermen catch fish for ceremonies, "a long time ago." Yes, the cut fin checks out, they confirm — its blood was fed back to the shark as a young pup, part of the original bond.

Around 7:00 p.m. we head to the village, welcomed by the whole community. Austin introduces me to all the "big men," the landowners. They've prepared food — sweet potato, fish cooked in banana leaf. A little betel nut later, our crew is mingling easily with everyone. We put a movie on, and during a brief romantic scene two girls in the crowd suddenly start fighting — we switch the film.

Austin takes the floor and introduces us formally. I give a short speech on the importance of their reef, and hand over a two-hundred-kina donation to the community, through Austin. A few hands clap.

The pastor blesses our food, everyone joining in, sweet voices rising from all sides, and we begin eating.

More talk with Austin about the shark — he retells the story in full.

We agree to visit an old man in the village, to record his own tales of the past.

Sam heads back to the ship by canoe with Austin's daughter; Alison swims back on her own. When Austin asks where Alison is, I end up lying, telling him she got a ride from the resort.

The sky's been full of shooting stars for three nights running now.

On board, Rich and Riversong — newly a pair — under the sad, watchful eyes of Alison, who still hasn't quite let go of Rich.

Steve's fever finally breaking, Jesse writing to his pregnant sister, Karen absorbed in her honors thesis.

July 27, 2000

I wake from another wild dream — dolphins trapped between the shore and sandbars, the tide still dropping,

all of them searching for a way through a maze of soft sand. I try to help one find another channel out.

A big transect day. Takes forever to get everyone moving; by 10:30 we're on site, a slight surge running. The coral here is young, with clear signs of past bombing scattered around.

The northwest monsoon must batter this reef hard for part of the year too.

The pace feels too slow for my taste — I think I've simply done this too many times now. I'd rather move efficiently and then really play.

Orla and I spot a small green wrasse with striking patterns, and I follow it a while, filming. A pod of dolphins passes, and for the next hour I keep hearing them underwater.

We're back around 3:00. Exhausted, I crash in Nemo's for more restless dreaming.

I paddle over to check in with Austin, and we set the old man's interview for Saturday. On the way past the resort, I stop for a beer and a chat with Nick, who mentions, almost in passing, that Rich and Alison have broken up. Strange to hear it from him, after living alongside Rich and Alison for over two years myself.

I hadn't been entirely sure either that Rich and Riversong were officially a couple now, though I'd suspected it from the tone he uses with her. He plays the wise guide; she falls for it. Good for both of them, honestly.

Meanwhile Rich has an infected leg and can't do much of anything.

I walk the beach after dark, hearing my name called out by kids along the way.

A fire glows at the water's edge. More hellos, more "Michel!" The elders keep asking after the shark. I pull the canoe back into the water.

I love paddling — the canoe steady beneath me, back in time for dinner under a miraculously clear sky.

We read from **The Prophet** that night — poetry settling over everyone's mind, seeming to inspire the whole table.

A philosophical evening. A good one.

July 28, 2000

Out for a reef-survey dive. I film a barramundi cod, a lobster, and play for a while with a whitetip shark asleep under a ledge.

A turtle sleeps among six lobsters, circling slowly as I approach.

July 29, 2000

Up early for the Saturday market — people arriving from all around to sell their catch. Most of the fish comes smoked; with the new-moon low tide, the market's flooded with mud crab. I buy mussels, fish, coconuts, while Riversong and Kirsten handle the vegetables. I enjoy just watching the scene unfold — the corner reserved for betel nut and cigarettes, the little addiction corner.

A band plays Christian songs, a preacher speaking over them.

Back on board around 11:00, a man we'd met earlier at Leibitz Cove comes by selling crab — three kina each, against ten-plus at the market. I buy all eleven he has. The trouble with that many crabs aboard is they occasionally escape, causing minor chaos, so I end up as

the ship's unofficial crab-wrangler, since I know how to handle them.

This whole area is remarkably wealthy — not just in cash, but in raw resources. It would be shockingly easy to bring in some dive gear and strip out every prized fish and lobster; I've seen fifty lobsters in a single dive here. But no — the area's carefully guarded, real intelligence at the community level.

Saturday acting class — we work up skits for our upcoming village event, a commitment already made, keeping the theater alive on board. We play at being sorcerers, throwing everything we can think of into a pot — gesture, word, dance, positive and negative alike — stirring it all together with the "stick of synergy" to eventually conjure up the Heraclitus itself.

Then a visit to the old man of the island. We go with Austin, and record, in three languages, the story of Nemnemin. The plan is to film these traditions and play them back for the children at our upcoming event.

The old man lives close to shore, always keeping an eye on the sea. He's carving two sago beaters, used to pound palm pith into pulp — the last surviving member of his generation. His eyes are bright, and we take our time settling in comfortably. We sit on a palm mat, and with Austin's help, the story begins. Once started, it flows on and on. Three children wander over to listen; one loses interest and leaves. Orla and I sit with our eyes and ears wide open. I don't understand the words, but I follow the shape of the story well enough, and his voice grows more animated as he goes.

His wife translates into Tok Pisin, Austin into English. It starts to rain, and we take shelter, watching birds while we wait it out. I keep catching the old man's eye. We'd brought sugar, tea, a small jar of coffee for him. His home is kept immaculate, catching the sunset light every evening. I feel genuinely privileged to spend this time

with him. He's seen so much change over the years, more than he can fully explain, and more than we'll ever really understand ourselves — something's been lost somewhere along the way, sacrificed to time. Time, our lord and master — however much you use it, it can just as easily enslave you, in its own quiet ritual of separation from things that matter. It feels good, simply, to sit and watch the sea, watch the canoes pass by.

I'm growing genuinely hooked on fishing myself — dropping a line, I've started to sense the tide, the depth, even the makeup of the bottom, just from watching the water over the side of the canoe.

I don't catch much yet, but I'm learning.

The women here are the real experts — working close to shore, they catch bait first with a bare hook and a perfectly placed cast, never missing, then set that bait on another line to catch something bigger, which in turn becomes bait for something bigger still. They seem to understand exactly what's happening beneath the surface, almost able to picture the whole scene before casting. Man's real progress has always come through this kind of observation. Are we losing that skill? Have we drifted so far from these sources that we simply can't read the water anymore?

Orla records the story of Nemnemin, the friendly shark, told to us that afternoon — an old man who once found a shark's unborn pup while gutting the day's catch, raised it by hand, fed it his own blood when he had nothing else, and released it back to the sea once it outgrew its makeshift home; a shark that returned again and again over the years to visit its old friend, and once, during a terrible storm, carried the old man's children safely to shore on its back when their canoe capsized. A story passed down through the family that still tends this stretch of coast today.

We stop by the resort for a beer, more wild stories from Austin. I catch the sunset filtering through the mangrove leaves, and we eat crab in peace, with the gift of a pipe loaded with something a little stronger than tobacco. Back on board, under the stars, shooting stars still streaking past, one after another.

July 30, 2000

A dive expedition out to one of the outer islands. We load the beagle with gear. Determined to catch fish today, I cast a lure and push for seven or eight knots — a bite almost immediately, a beautiful mackerel on the line, ten minutes out. I'd brought lime and salt along, just in case.

We drop into a channel — visibility's poor, but the fish are feeding, small mackerel, fusiliers schooling. Sam spots a manta from the boat. The shallows are carpeted in soft coral, a striking, spacious landscape. I film. Small stingrays dot the sand patches; lobster under every ledge.

The rest of the group swims to the island itself, exposed reef flats all around now at low tide. I stay with the boat and prepare a little dish — filleting the mackerel, lime juice, salt, a five-minute cure, and we all share in pure delight.

I troll the pass and land a jack — dinner sorted.

The wind picks up, salty spray coming over the bow for everyone. I steer carefully through each wave. We move to the lee side of the island and drop again.

An underwater mount here holds plenty of fish — more filming, huge brain corals, schools everywhere. A turtle swims lazily off; a big mackerel makes a pass. I lose myself in the pristine reef below.

Riding back through rain and heavy waves, I keep the lure trailing the whole way. Near the ship we land

another mackerel, then drop the line once more and land a third, a full meter long. Sashimi tonight, for certain.

I help cook Sunday dinner — a cocktail sauce for all the mud crab, mackerel sliced carefully for sashimi, the smaller trimmings saved for a quick ceviche snack before the meal proper.

Heaven again — fish on our plates, and the particular satisfaction of having caught it ourselves.

Before dinner I visit Austin, confirming our plans for Tuesday — I'll film a few more elders.

Rich is now officially with Riversong; Alison's taken the weekend off.

Rich and Riversong take the canoe out to the next island — a wonderful time, by all accounts.

Alison decides to stay another night at the resort, skipping Sunday dinner.

The whole thing's turning into a small soap opera by now.

July 31, 2000

An early morning paddle to the village — everyone already busy, the paths freshly swept, the morning doughnut seller making his rounds. Coffee with Austin; he rings the "bell," an old rusted gas cylinder, and the roosters answer in chorus.

We head to the study site for our next two transects, the deep zone.

While coral identification proceeds, I slip off and catch a lobster.

The transects go smoothly, and we're back aboard by 2:00.

I stay on watch that evening while most of the crew heads to the resort for a night out.

Ferdi waits for his pickup; over the radio, "we'll be fifteen minutes late." The engine cuts out, and Rich spends an hour and a half trying to fix it, in water barely four feet deep, forty meters from shore — why the full crew waiting there didn't just paddle in still baffles me, and somehow no one makes that move.

Radio call comes back: they need a rescue. Ferdi heads out on our own barely-functioning small boat; the beagle gets towed home. Some sharp words on deck.

Alison takes the canoe out but forgets to secure it — the rising tide carries it off. Gone, with the tide.

August 1, 2000

Another accident-review sequence to start the day — a somewhat absurd situation, all our small boats in disarray, and now a lost canoe on top of it. Hard to believe. The review runs long, some genuinely silly things surfacing along the way. Seamanship, I keep reminding everyone, is a state of mind, not a checklist. The whole beagle saga, tangled up with the "mad trio."

Science is canceled for the day, and Rich gets busy putting the small-boat system back in order.

I put together a spread for Kirsten's farewell dinner — sashimi, crab soup, a coconut fish curry, wine. The boys get lively and raid the lockers for more alcohol; dancing breaks out on deck. Nick visits; a nice, relaxed atmosphere overall.

August 2, 2000

Another morning accident review — starting to feel like a pattern now, and something's clearly off. Time to tighten things up again. Steve wakes Riversong, who

promptly falls back asleep, and somehow everyone's frustration lands on Steve — another small emotional flare-up.

A dive near the cave, filming schools of surgeonfish grazing the reef. I explore the cave itself — groupers, sweetlips, a playful pufferfish. I follow a school of unicornfish for a while, parrotfish joining them along the way.

Beautiful bright yellow soft coral tucked into small ledges. A wonderful dive, no one else around, free to just follow the reef's own rhythm.

In the afternoon, with Orla, we continue collecting the story of Nemnemin on land, visiting Nicholas on Nusa for another part of the tale. He sits on the beach, recalling the past — everyone here seems to direct their own storytelling naturally, with an ease that comes from having nothing to prove.

I film copra production in gorgeous light, the burning husks nearly hypnotic.

We walk to the other side to visit another elder in a different village. People here carve sharks — Bruno leads the carving. Cowry shells sit cleaning in glass bottles under the sun. More Nemnemin stories, and we walk through the mangroves to see where he was first found.

The story's simple on its surface, but the deeper layers carry real magic, real spellwork, real old conflicts.

Vinnie sits by her father's grave, recalling her time with him — telling us, from her canoe on the shore, how Nemnemin once helped tow her father's boat and guided him to good fishing.

Back aboard, Rich is genuinely sick, a forty-degree fever, his body simply giving out. He lies in Nemo's, tended first by Alison, then Riversong steps in, and the two

nearly come to blows over who gets to place the wet towel on his forehead. He's seriously unwell, mentally as much as physically, and the whole saga continues — for the entire afternoon, neither woman will leave him alone with the other, each terrified the other will somehow do more for him. It stops being about Rich getting well at all, and becomes something else entirely.

August 3, 2000

The most intense morning meeting yet. Still mourning the lost canoe, I get into a small argument with Alison; Rich springs up and we nearly come to blows ourselves. I put a hand out to hold him back, and the shouting stops cold. It could have turned ugly. I need to watch him carefully — and myself too, honestly, knowing all too well how easily a man can be broken down with a few words. I haven't come this close to real conflict aboard before.

Suddenly I'm cast as the villain — an easy projection onto whoever's leading, I suppose.

The last few days have been intense, especially with so many small accidents piling up, each one a near miss for something worse.

I spend the morning aboard, cleaning the morning's catch.

I'd watched a local man the night before rig his line, first for sardines, then working up the chain to mackerel. Another man arrives with two lobsters — for twenty-eight kina, enough food for two full days.

We try for an afternoon dive, but the outboard won't start. I push it back to the ship for repairs.

We hold a strat meeting. Something's clearly off, though it's hard to talk through, since everything gets met with a defensive edge. I find myself playing the difficult one

for a while now, partly because Brad's mind is clearly elsewhere, Rich sick and caught in the middle of an awkward triangle, Sam absorbed in the science and forgetting it takes a team effort.

So I spend some energy just trying to defuse triggers where I find them. Ferdi's good judgment helps a lot here.

I calm myself down untangling fishing line for a while — sometimes you just need a task to lose your mind in.

It works. Music in my ears for the first time in weeks — Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. Does the trick.

Chapter Six

THE OBSIDIAN TRAIL

September 6, 2000

On Lou Island, in the Admiralty group, Bismarck Sea.

From Lorengau we caught a PMV to Loniū Passage — a dozen fiberglass boats waiting there to run people out to the various islands nearby.

I ask if anyone's headed to Lou. "Sure — ask that man," pointing to a body stretched out on a pile of cut logs, resting.

"Yes, in twenty minutes. But right now I want to sleep."

The wind picks up, and the crossing turns rough — no compass, no torch, no toolbox aboard, just a drum of gasoline and half a dozen passengers, the bow slamming into every wave. Flying fish scatter from the hull; a huge manta does a backflip somewhere off to the side.

I talk with a young guy who keeps glancing anxiously at the man on the bow. We're going to be late, we're going to be late.

"I love playing soccer," he tells me. "We practice every day — two teams in our village. We're representing Manus province in Lae. The team leaves Friday to compete against the rest of Papua New Guinea."

Being French helps, given the World Cup connection. We arrive at Rai village — black sand beaches, huge trees meeting the sea.

Amson, the grumpy man from Loniū Passage, silently leads us to his house, and after introductions to half the

village, shows us a room. "My son's room — he's studying in Moresby right now."

On the door, some graffiti: headhunters.

We watch the team's last training match, meet the schoolteacher and a dozen more villagers.

The questions start. Why did you come to Lou Island?

Now's the moment to get to the point.

"We came to see the obsidian mines of your ancestors."

We spend the evening with Amson and his son Kol, waiting on a scholarship to study in Cardiff, Wales.

The whole island is Seventh-day Adventist now — a fairly strict faith. I pick up their church leadership manual and get a sense of the whole system: no drinking, no smoking, and, most significantly, no dancing or traditional custom allowed. So the island's older culture has largely vanished.

The people of Lou were once fierce warriors, using obsidian to make formidable spears — raiding across the islands, trading with the Titan people, who lived at sea, attacking villages and trading captives for obsidian flakes. The people of Lou, cannibals at the time, would fatten captives before a great feast. Lou stood at the center of magic and ritual power in the region, host to enormous ceremonies. I only learned all this afterward, but that first night I had nightmares of butchery — bodies, severed limbs.

Another old tradition, common across Melanesia: the cult of the dead. Bodies were buried directly beneath the house floor, and excavations here have uncovered layer upon layer of bones.

September 7, 2000

We walk a trail, twenty thousand years old, obsidian flakes scattered across the ground the whole way.

Obsidian, a volcanic glass, produces extremely sharp blades when struck correctly.

With no metal available, obsidian carried real value across the Pacific — traces of it have turned up in Samoa, Fiji, New Ireland, New Britain, the New Hebrides, and the Solomons.

It moved through the same networks as the now-famous Lapita pottery trade.

At the national museum in Port Moresby, I'd seen obsidian blades alongside a Lapita pot recovered from Lou.

The mines themselves are simple pits, no more than a meter across, reaching depths of up to sixty feet — clearly built for one man at a time. The real mystery is how they knew where to dig; locals speak of spells and specific leaves, ginger especially, used in the process.

There was once a master craftsman who knew precisely how to strike the stone for the right blade shape, using a specialized tool — but missionaries in 1911 confiscated all the artifacts and threw them into the sea. That knowledge is lost now, entirely.

The finest blades were kept for combat; the rest traded onward.

The people of Lou didn't fish themselves — that was the Titans' domain — trading instead for other food, like sago. The scarcity and value of obsidian likely shaped their whole warlike culture; with a fearsome reputation, they held a monopoly on the obsidian trade for some twenty thousand years.

Once metal arrived, obsidian lost most of its value, but the warrior culture persisted, if anything intensifying, raiding now to secure what trade once provided. German missionaries confiscated remaining artifacts, banned dances and ceremonies, and set about "civilizing" the population.

Seventh-day Adventists arrived in the 1930s.

We follow the trail down to a black-sand beach — the old landing site for pottery, captives, and trade goods. It's marked by a strangely shaped rock, said to host a magic bird that once warned the village of approaching strangers.

That inherited fierceness seems to have translated into real strength in both sport and education — most people in Rai village are remarkably well educated, ministers, army officers, teachers, many choosing to return home after their studies. Lou is also unusually fertile; almost anything grows in its volcanic soil, and the island now supplies much of the produce sold on Manus proper.

Fruit trees everywhere. Amson points out the difference between what's deliberately planted and what the birds have seeded on their own — oranges, pomelo, bananas, mango, guava, lau lau, various nuts, greens, potatoes, sweet potato, cassava, eggplant, tomatoes.

All of it grows practically wild.

Amson's reading a book on plants and their effects, and has become something of a health enthusiast himself, eating mostly greens and cassava.

An Australian anthropologist spent twenty years here studying the culture, interviewing most of the older generation. By now, in 2000, most of the elders who still remembered life before the missionaries have passed on. He excavated the old pits and the surrounding ground; most of what was recovered now sits in museums in Germany, Sydney, or the United States.

Nothing much remains here — I ask around and find only a few wooden bowls and imitation spears. The church never encouraged the old crafts, and most of those skills disappeared, leaving only farming behind.

We paddle back to the village by canoe, tracing the shoreline lazily.

From the beach, dolphins pass by. I go up to the house for my mask and slip in for a swim — the coral's not especially healthy this close to a village of some seventeen hundred people, but the volcanic formations themselves are spectacular. On the beach we meet a woman married to a Danish man, splitting her life between Laos, Lou, and Denmark — once a dive instructor at Walindi, where she swam with orcas during her years there.

Forty hours without coffee finally catches up to me — a brutal headache. I lie down, turning the obsidian trail over in my mind.

September 8, 2000

We catch the morning boat back to Loniu Passage around 8:30. Gray sky, but a smooth crossing — the wind hasn't had time to build much swell.

A PMV takes us to visit some caves. A man runs through the village rounding up flashlights, and we climb a hill, entering through a limestone opening — chamber after chamber, huge stalactites and stalagmites, some passages quite narrow. We climb down to where fresh water pools, close to sea level by now. Bats everywhere, and down in the water, a few stray crabs living there, though I couldn't say what they find to eat.

Swiftlets nest around the cave entrances — thankfully, no one's come to harvest them here, unlike Sabah, Borneo, where I once saw the nests guarded around the clock by rival collection teams.

We walk through a beachside village; a man's carving a channel through the reef for his canoe. Low tide lets us walk out to the drop-off for a snorkel.

The reef here is rich and healthy — something about it gives me a flash of the Maldives. A blacktip comes uncomfortably close, more than once, and I find myself perched on the reef top, fending it off with a kick. Then a huge Napoleon wrasse appears; surgeonfish everywhere. Another shark cruises by, a whitetip, inspecting us before darting off with a few quick movements.

I follow the reef looking for a way back to land that won't mean crossing the exposed staghorn flats.

On the beach we meet two men dressed like city professionals, watches on their wrists — one in charge of monitoring product pricing across PNG. I ask, half-joking, if I can lodge a complaint about fuel prices, our biggest expense on board these days, food having long since been overtaken.

We're invited to eat — crab, mackerel, fish, sago, pineapple, a small feast. A great conversation with the village chief's son, especially about the changes he's witnessed. He laughs easily, jokes constantly, but he's sharp underneath it all. The church, once again, halted most cultural activity in the village — no more dancing. He remembers, as a boy, everyone dancing, the drums going.

He offers to bring us fish around the full moon — full and new moon being the best times for mackerel, arriving by the thousand. He's lived his whole life by the sea and fishing. Sharks come close sometimes, he says, but you just knock them on the head. There's a spot near the Momote airport thick with sharks — you have to move fast when you're fishing there, before they take your catch first.

We ride back to town with the "big shots," plenty of jokes and laughter along the way. The crocodiles here, they say, are friendly enough — could tip you from your canoe if they wanted, but mostly just swim lazily past, leaving people alone. An American reportedly shot a twenty-five-foot crocodile during the war — nearly a record.

Back aboard for comments.

September 9, 2000

A minor obsession with a certain space documentary series takes hold of the ship.

Space keeps pulling more and more of my attention lately — I've already dug out the sextant, and the star charts have become popular reading again.

By my bed, a book on the solar system; above and around us, the Milky Way in full glory.

A dive on the pass — magical fish formations, a curious silvertip shark. I vocalize underwater, and the shark comes straight at me to investigate, retreating each time I stop.

September 10, 2000

Xtine arrives, radiant, aboard the ship — a lost suitcase, but still a bag of goodies and entertainment for the crew, new films, and news of friends scattered around the planet.

Talk of a Heraclitus retrospective planned at a gallery next year, a creative outlet to show some of the work that's come out of this ship.

A dive past the shipwreck — we reach a hundred and twenty feet in a lunar landscape, huge holes in a sandy bottom, each guarded by a territorial titan triggerfish.

We pick our way through like a minefield, careful not to stray too close to any of their claimed patches.

Sunday speeches.

September 11, 2000

We move the ship closer to town — hands-on piloting practice, and a smooth anchoring.

Heather, Rich, and Riversong are back.

A party on Rara Island — fire and drinks for weathered sailors, and changes on the horizon. Meditation under a very full, very bright moon. Space, calling out to all of us.

Our second visit to Rara. Brad passes out on the beach near the water. I keep working the fire that was started before sunset — falling into trance around fire always comes easily to me. I beat out rhythm on a stick over a log, a kind of knowledge that comes through the visual and the fire itself, not words.

Most people get properly drunk.

I watch *Easy Rider* — a cult classic — and can't help thinking of the Heraclitus as its own kind of easy-sailing crew.

September 12, 2000

I know we've been busy, but the days seem to slip past without leaving much of a mark. A route meeting, chart studies, a critical-path list, shipshaping, food ordered, officials contacted.

In the evening a group heads out to watch a sing-sing rehearsal.

Others come back without having seen any of it, just drunk. Last days in port.

From the ship we hear music and preaching — a traveling revival crusade, rock music and gospel opening the night, followed by a loud voice offering everything from financial relief to instant miracles.

I can't help wondering how much madness the world can absorb, and how easily people are drawn in.

September 13, 2000

Everyone's sitting cross-legged on deck, ready for lab, when less than a minute in we're boarded by a boat full of officials, come to search the ship.

They check everywhere — apparently a rumor's spread that we're collecting war relics. Our route has followed the old battle lines closely, and these waters are scattered with wrecks.

We must look suspicious from an outsider's view — a boat full of people, lingering for weeks in one place, not fishing, not behaving like typical tourists.

Brad's nervous — he has a flight to catch, chasing his own dream, and space won't wait for him.

I ask them, politely, to search his bunk first. By 8:15, without much fanfare, he slips quietly ashore, waving.

The food order never arrives — a minor disaster. We rush to the market to learn Amson won't make it until tomorrow.

The fax line's been down for days — turns out it was simply the wrong number. I send everything through at once, and call Gaie. We'd been weighing a possible detour to Cebu for days now, and finally need to settle it.

Two minutes, and it's decided: we won't go. Palawan in early December, then on toward Cambodia by late January.

I handle the official side, setting up a meeting for 11 a.m. tomorrow — a public holiday, so I already know there'll be a little extra "compensation" expected, kina in hand.

A good dinner together that night, the whole tribe regrouping before the big departure day.

Voyage from Manus to Davao, Philippines

September 14, 2000

The moon sets over Lorengau just as it rises over Los Negros. Boats pass by, loaded with people — the first day of celebrations for Papua New Guinea's twenty-fifth anniversary of independence.

A meeting: shipshaping, communications, a last mail run, clearance.

At the hotel, no faxes waiting, but the Papindo troupe is out beating the garamut — Papindo being the supermarket where we buy our dry goods. Everyone's dressed up, and it's almost comical watching pale-skinned expats join the dancing.

I need to track down the customs officer. Behind the post office, a sing-sing is already underway, and though he's late, the timing works out — I get to watch another round of dancing. The men are wonderfully expressive, hips thrusting, the girls dancing wild, some visibly shy as their movements expose more than expected — a sign, maybe, of a newer generation finding its own comfort level.

The men get properly wild, the crowd laughing and shouting. Huge carved garamut drums keep the beat. The dancers wear carvings around their necks and backs, leaves tied at their waists.

I finally catch the customs officer, and we head with his family to the office.

On the way, I hear my name called — Amson, resting on a log. My first question: did he bring the vegetables? That had been our real uncertainty — expected yesterday, with real doubt he'd show at all. Relief washes over me; we can sail today after all. Pomelo, bananas, tomatoes, oranges, lime — Synesthesia ends up stocked with more food than the entire Lorengau market combined.

The customs officer explains he'd been ordered to search the ship, asks whether we're collecting samples, and warns me we're being watched more closely than we'd realized — no longer quite so anonymous. That rules out any chance of coring at Hermit Island too, for now. He stamps every passport, hands over our clearance, and I give him fifty kina for the overtime.

Driving back, he stops near a group of sailing canoes that had passed close to the ship earlier — they're about to start racing.

That gives me time to meet the sailors, all from Pere village, made famous decades ago by the anthropologist Margaret Mead. Their traditions clearly remain strong; I catch the eyes of the navigators themselves.

Uniformed officials greet them formally, and the races begin — two categories, single-sail and double-sail canoes, rigged with square sails, steered by a paddle raised and lowered at the stern. Each double-sail canoe carries a crew of six to eight. At the signal, they hoist sail in a rush and head off toward Hawaii Island, reaching speeds of six to eight knots in barely ten knots of wind. I shoot a whole roll of film, hardly believing my luck.

I wander down to the dock, closer to our pickup point.

With half an hour left, I catch one more troupe performing briefly in the bush for the camera — going all in on the effort, faces intricately painted with lines and

dots, the product of hours, days, months of preparation, all building toward this single moment of celebration.

Another dance follows, one of the senior officials joining in, studying the movements closely — much of it built around a clearly sexual energy.

I even manage to check messages at a makeshift internet setup. Wild.

Back aboard, I call a strat meeting, hoping to stay a few extra hours so everyone gets a chance to see at least a dance or two. Rich is against it; Xtine's worried about timing; Riversong sides with Rich. A decision's needed, so I make the call: we go now. I'd only wanted to give the crew the chance, and would gladly have caught a few more dances myself. Well.

Our departure meeting: I lay out the route, emergency stations, and the watch schedule worked out the day before — midnight-to-four: Rich, Steve, Karen, Rebecca. Four-to-eight: Ferdi, Orla, Riversong, Dave. Eight-to-twelve: Maik, Alison, Jason, Jesse, Heather.

We raise anchor at 3:00 p.m.

Fifteen of us aboard now, the command room crowded. The plan is to stop at Hermit Island for some memorable diving and a visit with Joseph. Coring's still somewhere in the back of my mind.

Exiting the channel, a last goodbye to the shipwreck, and a passing boat trades us a mackerel.

A mile and a half offshore, we prepare to raise sail when a pod of spinner dolphins arrives to ride the bow. We're moving slowly, two to three knots. They linger, and I climb down onto the bobstay chain to be closer.

A group of six rides first, their echolocation mild at first. After five minutes the clicking grows louder, more elaborate — a second group of six larger ones

approaches from below, racing up to the bow, passing right beside me with unmistakable eye contact. The sound turns intense, clicks coming from every direction. More arrive from all sides. They hold loose groups of about six, moving with some of the most synchronized coordination I've ever witnessed.

Groups trade places at the bow, others racing in from the side for a closer look at me. At times a dozen crowd the bow, almost within arm's reach. For more than fifty minutes I hang on the chain while the crew raises sail — the winch gears seem to draw their curiosity too. The echolocation never lets up, as if there's suddenly a great deal to say. I vocalize underwater myself, my own voice rising and falling with the mood below.

At one point several are visibly defecating as they pass — I watch it drift by. In total, more than forty dolphins surround us, many staying below, running through more of their synchronized patterns.

I feel, for a while, genuinely part of the pod. As always, time slips away entirely — only the need to surface for breath marks the passing minutes. A quick check now and then to make sure we aren't drifting too close to shore.

I finally climb back up, giving someone else a turn. The connection holds; the dolphins stay with us.

Xtine goes next for five minutes, then Jesse. The energy settles into something calmer, though they keep circling.

Once the sails are fully raised, we change course, and the dolphins follow anyway.

As if that weren't enough, the full moon rises fire-red on the horizon.

Dolphins flip near the stern.

I take the didgeridoo to the bow — more dolphin activity, the whole day ending in something like pure joy.

I take it as a good omen. I feel steady in this role — far easier, honestly, than standing back and simply supervising while Brad handles the maneuvering.

We sail part of the way, a mild southeasterly carrying us at a comfortable three knots; once it dies, we switch to engine. Hermit Island sits a hundred and fifty miles from Manus.

We need to arrive by lunchtime on the sixteenth. Easy enough.

I plan to make steady progress, and if we're early, heave to closer to the islands to prepare properly — lower the boat, ready the dive gear. And, quietly, I'm hoping for one more moment of cetacean magic along the way.

I keep waking through the night, checking the sails, glancing at the logbook — nothing too different from usual, except that I find myself doing most of the talking in our meetings these days.

September 15, 2000

An uneventful, sweaty day below — the heat down in the bunks nearly unbearable.

A calm day overall, no real news, just a swim stop in the deep blue. A minor scramble over movie rights in Nemo's — what to watch, whose turn it is — so I start scheduling screenings properly, to keep the little library functioning as one.

The wind, though from the southeast, stays too weak, and we switch on the engine, aiming to reach Hermit Island by 11:00, when the sun angle will let us see the channel entrance clearly.

In Nemo's, a movie marathon — we watch *The Shawshank Redemption*.

The midnight-to-four watch drifts too far south, and I already sense we won't make our early arrival now.

Rich isn't really present these days; he and Riversong mostly keep to themselves.

A shame for Riversong, honestly — she's clearly going through something difficult, and I don't think isolating themselves is the right approach.

Rich is first mate, after all, but entirely checked out lately. I hope he finds his way back.

September 16, 2000

Hermit Island comes into view with the sunrise. I hadn't slept much, and go back down until 9:30.

We approach the channel around noon, squalls circling us as we wait for the right moment to go in.

Sails down, everyone at their stations, and we enter — dolphins greeting us as we do. The channel's wide, over a mile across. We approach Jalun Island; the chart proves nearly useless at this scale, so we navigate mostly by eye.

We try anchoring near Jalun but don't even find bottom. We try a different spot, entering a bay, sounding depth with a hand lead line, but the lagoon runs deep throughout.

We lower the small boat to scout further — a spot twelve meters deep, but hemmed in by reef on all sides. I maneuver carefully, the ship feeling more and more like an extension of myself by now, and we drop anchor — but it's simply too close to the reef; if we swing at all, we'd end up a few meters from the reef top.

By 4:30, another few attempts with the lead line prove fruitless.

I weigh the options quickly and make the call: we're leaving, before it gets too late and too dark.

Raising anchor is tricky even in calm conditions, and I'd rather not think about doing it in anything worse. We manage it with some difficulty — the bottom here was likely coral.

Neutral, forward, reverse. Ten degrees to starboard, five to port.

I feel the ship now, almost instinctively — easier, honestly, and less stressful than constantly having to watch and calculate.

I pull Alison off the bow team after she and Rich fall into a shouting match: "You hypocrite." "It's over, do you understand? How can you think you can live here? You have to get past it."

For a few minutes the bow turns genuinely unpleasant. Dolphins had come to visit, but the moment the shouting starts, they vanish instantly.

I hold firm regardless — no room for hesitation when it comes to actually moving the ship. Straightforward, no exceptions.

So we head out, keeping the small boat in the water just in case, daylight running out fast. We clear the channel by sunset. Dolphins leap in farewell, a rainbow arcing over the horizon.

We haul the boat aboard in fairly high swells, and raise sail at the same time — excellent seamanship practice, forced or not.

We raise the foresail under moonlight and sail through the whole night, wind steady and in our favor. I sleep like a baby. An extraordinary day, all told.

That evening I project some biosphere slides against the sails. One image catches me — Gaie, looking through glass at some artificial, dead ocean, her expression sad, reflective.

Here aboard, we're still privileged enough to witness genuinely unspoiled reef, barely touched by anything.

The real question is: for how much longer?

We have to travel further and further to find places like this. The great technological machine keeps advancing. But the ideas planted in the sixties and seventies are still bearing fruit — the West isn't held up as the automatic answer to everything anymore, not the way it once was.

September 17, 2000

I wake for sunrise — a look at the chart, check our speed, set the course, and drift back into dreaming a while longer.

A wonderful breakfast — tomatoes and eggs, a juicy pomelo — and the wind strengthens through the morning, reaching six knots by noon.

Sunday-night speeches. My instincts about Rich prove right — he's still not really back, still searching for something. He doesn't seem to want to be here at all right now; his speech tonight was mostly about New Mexico.

4 a.m., rain hits us — we're ten miles off Wuvulu Island. The midnight-to-four watch had steered too far north, and this small squall pushing us due south turns out almost perfectly timed. Probably the only one who reads it that way, though.

September 18, 2000

A real cat-and-mouse game with wind and weather now, coming from every direction, unpredictable, gusting to thirty knots out of the northeast at times. We tack six separate times over the next few hours. Around 8:00, despite less-than-ideal conditions, we head for Wuvulu.

I catch myself dreaming of killer whales, knowing full well they won't appear — indulging the fantasy anyway.

We hold a course of 240 degrees, and two and a half miles off the north side, we lower the small boat — the first dive team heads out.

The weather picks up during this window, and I put the ship on a hove-to port tack.

Gray sky pressing in all around.

At this point my focus isn't the reef at all, just the ship — every part of my attention on her, like she's an extension of my own skin. Every shift in the wind registers like a new note.

I'm also practicing what I've preached for years — seizing the moment when it's there. There'd been a window in the weather, and the diving crew comes back beaming, having seen big fish, sharks — a real reward. I think of all the times in the past when my own heart ached over a missed opportunity, a moment the team let slip by.

I wish someone had made that call for me once. Now I'm the one in the position to do it. Every decision gets weighed carefully — careful doesn't mean slow — the situation assessed, risk and reward balanced, and we go.

The turning weather rules out a second trip; we raise the boat, then the sails.

We're sailing now along the New Guinea coast. In two days we'll cross the invisible line dividing two nations —

Irian Jaya. Beyond the mental weight of it, that border means nothing out here. At sea you read the geography, study the weather, watch the clouds, and are reminded constantly that the whole planet is simply home — not some vague green fantasy, but plain fact.

And within that, humanity still has to carve out its own cultures, its own sense of space. Not so different from other mammals, still contesting territory at heart — all our technological progress hasn't really changed that, just added new weapons, shifted the rules, without touching the underlying game.

A comic moment at the helm, Alison steering:

"Steer more to port."

"Okay — steering what, exactly?"

"I don't know, I can't see the numbers on the compass."

I can't help laughing — the whole scene almost absurd. I swap in a new helmsman. Wind's blowing twenty-five knots, no room to jibe safely right now.

The wind stays thoroughly unpredictable.

The sky's colors shift subtly all around us; I turn slowly through a full circle just to take it all in, intoxicated by the beauty of it — the kind of whirling a dervish might use to step outside time altogether, seeking something new.

At sea, we have the rare privilege of experiencing all this at a slower, more deliberate pace.

The wind keeps the rigging singing; occasionally an off-note calls for attention — a block knocking against the rail, or a course running a little too close to the edge of comfort.

We hold steady, six points off the beam, cruising at a comfortable 4.7 knots straight through dinner. A

Monday comments-and-observations session turns to theater — memories of Bali, the Solomons, Nusalik, folding the newer crew members into our loose circle of actors. I suggest each watch prepare a short piece for Wednesday, to follow acting class.

More sensory overload as the evening goes on. I retreat into music for a while, letting the ship's steadiness carry me — a wind that doesn't spook easily. The hull rolls gently with each swell, almost like rocking a child to sleep.

I move easily between different states of mind these days, switching almost instantly. My eyes drift over the sails, the canvas flapping and then filling again with wind. The stars seem to say hello.

A kind of universal sight, this sky — beyond words entirely. Once the tower of Babel grew too tall, communication started to fray, the top no longer quite reaching the base, and over time contact was lost altogether, splintering into separate realities. Will the sky eventually bring us back together, or are we doomed to keep dividing? Evolution, either way, starts with the individual.

The crew feels genuinely united tonight. Dinners have taken on a mellow rhythm — nothing taken too seriously, nothing dismissed too lightly. A real, quiet synergy running through it all.

I notice my own voice, gestures, decisions — clear voice, straightforward orders, no real questioning of the underlying judgment, just careful attention to safety in the middle of real adventure. Not blind procedural caution, but a full awareness of what the elements are actually telling you. Scenarios form almost instantly in my mind and resolve just as fast — like a chess game, ten moves ahead already calculated, the mind resting even while fully engaged, tuned in, listening.

Funny, too, how stories travel and change in the retelling. Tonight we retell the tale of the young woman who came aboard in the Solomons, claiming her husband was trying to kill her — how Rich and I went to the village only to discover she'd spun the whole thing; her husband was miles away, had nothing to do with that particular village, and she'd simply been angling for a ride.

September 19, 2000

The wind gods are with us — steady southeast, cruising at four to five knots, five or six points off the beam, about as comfortable as sailing gets.

Lab at 11:00. I try to picture myself with no fixed sense of up or down, simply anchored to planet ocean, traveling through space — a real expansion of perception, rotating my attention in slow circles, first losing any fixed orientation, then letting it drift free.

Steady attention on the breath, with only small lapses. I sense my own outer edges, watching for any incoming pull of energy.

The route's settled for now, so I finally get to relax properly, losing myself in Arthur C. Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama*.

Two cargo ships pass close by, Karen working the radio in a bit of a frenzy. A clean sunset, the orange disc slipping below the horizon. Again my mind drifts to the movement of our home planet through space. Clear sky, not a cloud above, wind steady with us.

An eighty-mile day's run, all under sail — eleven hundred and fifty nautical miles left to Davao. We'll need to average about sixty-nine miles a day to reach the Philippines by October 6th.

On deck, we project the ship's history slideshow onto the sails — old stories, feeding new ones.

September 20, 2000

Wind stays with us all day and night, peak speeds over six knots. A hundred-and-fifteen-mile day's run, right on course — bringing our required daily average down to sixty-five miles.

The Heraclitus seems happy, all bright smiles under the stars. I keep picturing us traveling through space, planet ocean beneath us, the RVH our mobile home.

Around 1:00, a pod of spinners crosses our path, leaping high enough to make sure we notice, though clearly in too much of a hurry to linger at the bow.

During acting class we split into groups to prepare pieces for Xtine's birthday tonight.

I cook a roast while music gets set up on deck — wine at sunset. The evening turns properly theatrical. I introduce a human character while playing an alien from outer space, collecting data. Each watch performs a short piece — the midnight watch's comedy routine, a rap from the four-to-eight, a lost-seaman's song from the eight-to-twelve.

Slides project onto the mainsail — my recurring favorite theme, monkeys in cages, an analogy for our own confined lives back on land, locked in by cities. And, alongside it, the natural world's marvelous design — Eden, still here, still very much alive.

The looming threat of the technosphere, steadily consuming space and time. Man, caught in his own rat race to nowhere?

Music on the boombox. Stars overhead.

September 21, 2000

Wind out of the east, good miles made — an uneventful day, honestly, chilled through. I finish *Rama*, only to learn there's a sequel waiting.

Thursday night on Zen, from a Joseph Campbell text, and I just can't settle into it tonight — the words feel distant, so I let my eyes drift to the stars instead. As always with these kinds of subjects, it comes down to something deeply individual — there's no single recipe, however good, that works for everyone; there's always room to experiment your own way through.

September 22, 2000

Wind's dropped, though a strong two-knot westerly current keeps pushing us along. A swim during lunch. I clear a fishing line tangled in the prop, catching a glimpse of the endless blue below.

Comments and observations that evening.

September 23, 2000

Engine on at 9 a.m., two hours of motoring.

A boat approaches — a large canoe, two Indonesian fishermen aboard. Good to speak Indonesian again. Ferdi finds some old rupiah stashed in his bunk, and we trade for four small tuna.

We heave to two miles off the Isabel Reefs, a five-mile submerged bank running fifteen to thirty feet deep.

The current's too strong to hold position properly, and the anchor snags on the reef. After several attempts, I go down myself — forty-five feet, against a three-knot current. I make it, though I'm still not entirely sure how. We drift with the current, the small boat trailing along.

The ship, by now, is drifting slowly over the coral itself — a strange, almost dreamlike experience, everyone floating alongside as she moves.

A flurry of photos, the ship under full sail.

Children of the sea, swimming beside the mother ship, gliding with the current — a genuinely extraordinary moment of beauty.

Squid hang near the stern; we drop a lure quickly, but they show no interest.

We stay hove to. The wind dies entirely, not even enough to stir the sails.

That evening, drinks on the stern, music playing, the sky bright and cloudless, every star visible.

I spend part of the evening exploring the new computer Riversong brought back with her. She's in a difficult place right now — a lot happening all at once. Rich has slipped into playing the overbearing protector, and I worry she might feel smothered by it, even though I know his intentions are good.

The computer itself is remarkable — multimedia software, and I start downloading images to eventually refresh the website.

The possibilities feel enormous — we could put together a full presentation right here on board.

September 24, 2000

Our day's run: a modest forty nautical miles, only two hours actually under sail, the rest simply the current carrying us along. An oceanic triggerfish has been trailing the ship for three days now, feeding on the crabs that have taken up residence on the hull.

Around 1:00, reading in Nemo's, someone shouts "whales" — a few hundred meters off, three sperm whales spouting. They rest at the surface for ten minutes before showing their flukes and heading into a deep dive.

I climb the mast for a meditative hour, no land anywhere in sight. The weather's picked up, and we're cruising at four knots. A tern circles the ship steadily. I keep thinking of space.

I read a chapter on Bougainville's circumnavigation, struck by the insight into what those early voyages were really like — how much easier we have it now. A sailor's life then wasn't safe, wasn't easy, but the exploration was genuinely uncharted — unknown territories, unpredictable receptions ashore, friendly or otherwise. Humanity's come a long way since.

Just before sunset, a pod of spinner dolphins crosses our stern, two hundred strong at least. They don't come close; we're drifting again, log-like, on the current.

September 25, 2000

Stars reflected on the bow tonight, no visible line between sky and sea.

We start the day with a swim stop.

A few hours of motoring, the sea flat as a mirror.

Underwater acting class, complete with photos — "children of the sea." The current runs strong; bodies moving fluidly with silk fabric and props.

I transfer the images straight into the computer, building toward a sea-people-themed slideshow presentation.

Inverted, the images shift into something more like space people.

An evening out. I run late cooking, the stove's fuel line clogging for the third time.

We eat a stew over slightly oversalted rice — a crème caramel salvages the meal.

In Nemo's, *Once Upon a Time in the West* plays on a well-used video setup.

September 26, 2000

Wind still absent — a few hours of motoring to make up lost distance, and preparations for an equator-crossing party. Ten of us will be crossing for the first time.

The evening opens with sunset drinks. The men get thoroughly drunk, Jesse dancing naked on deck. As things grow loud and rowdy, I step back, content to watch the stars instead.

Once everyone's asleep, the five of us still up — Ferdi, Xtine, Rich, Alison, and me — prepare a rude awakening. 5 a.m.: we cross the equator. AC/DC's "Hells Bells" blasting from the speakers, a bell ringing over and over. Everyone wakes in a daze to find themselves covered in flour, shaving cream, and toilet paper, doused in a secret concoction from the Synesthesia manager — peanut butter, soy sauce, cordial, a genuinely nasty mixture. Alison proves instrumental in perfecting it.

The deck's a total mess, and everyone slips right back into a kind of collective amnesia.

September 27, 2000

An amnesia day, everyone wandering around in a daze, recovering from last night. Jesse's a year older today, though his face looks a solid twenty-five years older this morning. Another lazy, luxurious day between sky and sea, not much to do beyond simply being.

September 28, 2000

Wind picks up, out of the northeast — we're cruising at six and a half knots. Rain pours down, giving the deck carpet a wash and me a free shower, and, right on cue, our first proper catch — a beautiful yellowfin tuna on the line.

I spot a pod of over a hundred dolphins I can't quite identify — striped faces, sharply pointed black-and-white dorsal fins. They circle the ship briefly before continuing on their own course.

As usual, people default too easily to heaving to rather than pushing on — I find myself constantly nudging someone to take the helm properly. A strange undercurrent at times, small egos flaring here and there.

September 29, 2000

Approaching Halmahera, I weigh the option of cutting through the Morotai Passage. After some thought, I choose instead to pass near the north coast — we'll save a bit of fuel in the process too.

Four hundred miles from Davao now. I've spent the last week visualizing currents and weather patterns; the ship's moving well, clearly content.

Comments and observations tonight touch on some low-grade conflict, the eternal argument over cups and plates. Underneath it, I sense Rich playing the preacher, trying to impress Riversong, who dutifully backs him up — though it all misses the bigger picture. You can't really preach about community while spending most of your energy building a private bubble for two. Riversong's back on watch now, and Rich's near-total claim on her time seems to be easing, though I notice she's already growing a little jealous, especially since Rich has started spending watch time with the newest addition aboard,

the striking Rebecca. Every man on board seems half-smitten already — I'll admit she carries a genuinely magnetic, erotic energy.

Steve's doing well, craving cigarettes but managing. Jesse spends most of his time in his bunk lately.

Honestly, the RVH could double as a soap opera some days — entirely a matter of which lens you choose to view it through.

I spend hours with the new computer, working through images, diving into the concept of "dreamlands," slowly getting a handle on the different software — learning by playing, mostly. I haven't touched a computer seriously in years; time to catch up.

I know these things can pull you in completely.

I remember getting similarly hooked once in Miami — a similar pull, though here the ocean stays immediate, right against my skin, the wind still setting the direction, the sails still breathing.

September 30, 2000

Two years since we slipped out of Darwin. Rich wants to mark the occasion, so we watch old footage of the ship's construction and the 1998 Darwin dry-dock.

Meanwhile dolphins appear all around the ship — spinners, but also common dolphins, leaping and spinning, surrounding us entirely by now. They keep their distance, since we're too slow to give them a proper bow wave, but they cruise alongside regardless. I get in the water, aware of their presence even without being able to see them below. Sunset turns into its own kind of light show.

October 1, 2000

Five days from Davao, and most of the crew's run out of tobacco, except Ferdi. I find myself craving it badly, watching my own mind work through the withdrawal with some detached amusement.

I picture a whole little underworld forming aboard, Ferdi as some kind of tobacco kingpin holding court, the rest of us circling hopefully in the shadows, waiting for a friendly moment. Funny at times, a little grim at others.

An interesting small experiment, really, in how to handle human addiction — just let it be, keep the supply available.

Davao, the fastest-growing city in the Philippines, second-busiest port after Manila. Tidal currents here can reach three knots. I decide to keep things deliberately loose for another few days before tightening the crew back into proper shipboard rhythm.

Strat command planned for the coming days, plenty of rest built into the watches first.

Sorting out the finances for Xtine to carry back with her.

I've settled into an odd sleep pattern lately — most of the daylight hours spent asleep, surfacing around sunrise, sunset, and briefly around lunch, but properly awake through the night.

October 3, 2000

Simply can't sleep. We enter the Gulf of Davao around 9:00 p.m.

A heavenly sunset. Dolphins arrive to ride the bow, trailing a magic thread of bioluminescence behind them.

Cruising toward Davao at five knots — current against us the whole way, so we've been motoring for two days

now, switching fuel tanks, sixteen hundred liters burned so far.

Our second strat command of the week, preparing for arrival, keeping everyone focused on the tasks ahead.

I work out the route through to Cambodia.

I remember a line from Robert Anton Wilson — the map is not the territory.

But a map still helps you navigate toward a destination. The area's grown familiar by now — currents, shoals, the major cities all forming a kind of mental map of what's possible.

I plan the route to leave room for real exploration, rather than being boxed in by impossible deadlines.

So I propose staying around Davao for three weeks — time for the crew to blow off steam, get the science team properly trained, handle some needed ship maintenance, and still leave room to explore.

Then a forty-day cruise toward Palawan, with stops along the way.

We'll need to pass through the Sulu Archipelago, home to some famously active pirates.

Plenty of fishing-boat lights around tonight — adjusting course, staying alert.

October 4, 2000

By sunrise, Mount Apo shows a plume of smoke, and the Davao skyline comes into view.

We arrive near the Santa Ana pier around noon.

We drop anchor two cables offshore, but the holding ground's poor, and the anchor drags. We try again — drags again.

Third attempt finally holds, and I let out a long breath.

We've arrived.

We wait on officials, relying on the pilot station to relay communications, since neither the coast guard nor customs carries VHF radio here.

By 12:30, quarantine visits — some paperwork, but mostly it comes down to a cash payment, which is really why he came. The paperwork's largely theater, and, as it turns out, we're already handed our eventual departure clearance out of the Philippines at the same time.

The customs officer is more thorough, putting on a bigger show to earn his own cut — form after form, mostly, I suspect, just for effect. Pleasant enough, though, and once the obvious exchange happens, I catch a ride with him on the pilot boat to reach the immigration office before it closes.

My first real taste of land in twenty days at sea, and nearly a year since I last stood in a proper city. Everything feels frantic — painted jeepneys, taxis, cars, the fumes alone nearly overwhelming. We head off in the customs officer's Volkswagen Beetle, only to learn immigration's relocated. I arrive there by 3:00, sitting in a room full of empty desks, a few men reading newspapers.

While they process the passport, I dash to the bank, only to learn I can't cash the three-thousand-dollar check I'd been counting on to see us through here. I exchange two hundred dollars instead.

Back at the office, I learn every crew member needs their own form filled out. We schedule it for the morning, fifty dollars ensuring it actually happens on time.

The crew stays aboard tonight. I find an internet café, send word to Gaie that we've arrived, then head to the supermarket without meaning to buy much — until I spot

green asparagus for fifty cents a kilo, and an entire meal plan takes shape. Oyster mushrooms, real cream, penne, parmesan, bacon for a proper pasta, mangoes for dessert, and three bottles of red wine for an evening aboard the RVH.

No cash left to get back to the ship, and the radio channel's tied up. I arrange for the pilot boat to run me back, with a pickup planned early the next morning.

We eat in peace, trading news, savoring having actually arrived somewhere.

October 5, 2000

Wake at the crack of dawn with a brutal headache — the pollution here is more than I can easily stomach anymore, my tolerance clearly gone soft.

The pilot boat's there, and by 8:30 I'm back at immigration, helping sort passports, asking about the extension process. All the while I watch the gestures around me — so much said through expression alone, with clear traces of Spanish influence everywhere, especially in the language.

I also learn Mindanao's in real turmoil, hostages taken by a Muslim extremist group based in the Sulu Archipelago.

Military presence is heavy, and we're advised against the Basilan Strait for now.

Everything needs sorting quickly now — money, route, crew coming and going — while still giving an eager crew room to blow off steam ashore, in a controlled way, without making anyone feel unnecessarily tied down.

A good challenge to navigate.

I stop by a dive shop and meet Bebot Santa Cruz — we connect instantly, talking conservation, and suddenly

our whole route comes into focus. He knows these waters like a true master, speaks of "the voice of the sea." We study the chart together, and the proposed route looks extraordinary — aside from three hundred miles of motoring against current.

Back aboard to let everyone finally go ashore.

My head's buzzing — too much noise, too much artificial stimulation after so long at sea.

At 6:00, Bebot, John from the dive shop, and a friend come aboard to visit.

One of those genuinely magical evenings — real poetry in the air.

In Palawan, they tell me, men who go to sea belong to her entirely. You never really know if they'll return, and even if they don't, you can't assume they're dead — so there are songs written for them instead.

In the Bohol Sea, cetaceans of every kind roam — baleen whales, orcas, sperm whales, pygmy sperm whales, Fraser's dolphins, pilot whales.

One small island once hunted whales heavily during the old whaling era, and, until recently, was reportedly used by Japanese vessels for illegal whaling.

Locals there are remarkably knowledgeable, able to predict surfacing times with real accuracy.

But the real highlight, they say, is Tubbataha Reef, at the center of the Sulu Sea — an ancient reef system, seeding the surrounding region with more reef fish species than anywhere else in the Philippines, pristine, untouched by human influence. The weather only allows visits during a narrow window each year.

Conditions might not be ideal, but it's possible — and the chance to document a genuinely untamed reef, its

behavior, coral cover, species diversity, would be invaluable for our work.

The reef itself grew up along the rim of a submerged volcano.

We drink wine, talk long into the night, listen even longer, all of it carried by that particular energy shared among people who love the sea.

October 6, 2000

Dave, Jesse, and Steve get drunk and fall asleep on watch, so I decide to let them spend two days ashore in a hotel room to properly get it out of their systems. Better out than lingering.

Everyone's understandably eager to get to shore and shop, so we agree to take the first few days off before regrouping after the weekend.

I, though, haven't had much chance to rest myself.

The coast guard pays a visit. The new route needs finalizing. Money needs sorting.

I commit to a theater performance, gathering the troupe back together to keep that thread alive — the only real way is to just set a date and commit, usually amid some degree of chaos, feeding off the pressure of it.

Strat command proves difficult lately. Rich wants to be captain — resenting, it seems, how centralized decision-making has become under me.

I understand where it's coming from, but he's not really in the right state right now to take on that kind of responsibility. Things have been strange for him, tangled up in the Riversong-Alison situation, and he's seeing everything through a fairly narrow lens these days. If he genuinely wants to captain the ship, he'll need to step outside that tunnel and see the moment clearly.

His focus right now splits two ways — Riversong, and the ship's power systems.

He seems to be looking for confrontation, and I can't feed that. But we talk, and I hope, between the two of us, something like a shared understanding can still take shape.

Chapter Seven

Davao, Philippines

October 11, 2000

We move the ship to Samal Island. Rich pilots us in and anchors.

Jesse and I dive the anchor. It looks like a graveyard down there — all the coral dead, apart from one or two damselfish, nothing at all. The bottom is entirely coral, and our chain has broken up more dead structure in its wake. This part of the ocean is simply dead, and fishermen still keep trying anyway, spending a whole day chasing the hope of a lucky catch, sometimes coming back with nothing.

Orla and I go into town to check with officials and learn about a fiesta happening in one of the villages. We ride up on a motorbike.

The fiesta itself is tomorrow, but tonight we're invited to watch cockfights. A platform's been built, and below it, men are stroking their birds, preparing them.

We get a seat of honor. Money changes hands, bets get placed. We're lucky — it's a good match; sometimes they're over in seconds. Blades are strapped to the birds' legs; it's a fight to the death. A few bicycles nearby already carry dead roosters home, tonight's dinner.

Back in town before dark, we pass the fishing market — another sad sight. Apart from a few tuna, it's mostly juveniles: baby parrotfish, baby grouper, damselfish, moorish idols.

The town feels calm. We eat barbecued chicken, every part used — liver, guts, white meat, sausage — while kids nearby get absorbed in loud video games.

There's no real corner of quiet anywhere.

At the dock, each arriving boat sets off a burst of activity — bicycles, mopeds, some remarkably clever transport contraptions carrying passengers away — then quiet again, until the next boat. We sit at a shop, drinking a beer, eating fresh roasted peanuts.

October 12, 2000

Fiesta day. We call it an off-day and split the crew into two groups. Orla and I take today. We arrive early enough to realize not much will happen beyond drinking and sport, so I head inland instead. Our driver drops us at the foot of a mountain and comes along, though he's never actually climbed it himself. We pass through coconut groves, the last remnants of forest — already being cleared too. We stop in a hut, lying down, listening to birds and the distant beat of music.

We keep climbing, reaching a limestone cliff face. Swiftlets flit in and out of the ledges. Finally, real silence.

October 13, 2000

Heather's first dive. Once again the reef is heartbreaking — overgrown with algae, clear signs of extensive dynamite fishing, cyanide damage throughout. We barely see any fish at all.

For two days, hardly any new fish have made it to market. We learn the gulf itself is essentially dead; fishermen now travel forty or fifty miles out for anything worthwhile, many venturing into Indonesian waters in the Celebes Sea.

Friday the thirteenth passes without incident. Hollywood doesn't always get it right.

October 15, 2000

Out in the late afternoon, hunting for somewhere to stay. A rickshaw takes us to a waterfall, beautiful water, though our would-be guide casually mentions a man died in the cave beneath the falls. No place to sleep there without a tent, so we cross to the other side of the bay and find an abandoned resort, holes in the roof, no one around. Asking locals, we're pointed toward "Paradise Island" instead. Getting dark by now, so off we go — a thirty-minute motorbike ride from the road. It turns out to be something like a weekend park for the Davao crowd, but the bungalows are decent, and we finally find what we're after: an actual bed.

We indulge in a bottle of wine, sashimi, squid, shrimp, and turn in.

October 16, 2000

6:30 — I wake to find the weekend crowd already arriving. I decide to head to the other side of the island, hoping to spot dolphins near Talikud Island. We pass through coconut groves, drying copra, small villages.

We take a banca out around Talikud — hundreds of canoes fishing. In a few spots we can see straight to the bottom, but no fish anywhere, even in this supposedly protected area.

The coral itself is healthy, the water exceptionally clear — a real relief after so long without it.

Back aboard, Brenda's just arrived.

October 17, 2000

The 5 a.m. banca to Davao with Orla — she's leaving today. I hadn't quite registered it until yesterday. I knew the date intellectually, but nothing about it felt real yet.

A taxi to the airport, a coffee, and I watch Orla go through the gate. See you in January.

My task now is the visa extensions — no money, no visa progress possible without it. A visit to the bank, an endless wait for the exchange rate. The Philippine economy is in real turmoil, the president facing corruption charges, the peso down to forty-eight to the dollar.

I wait over an hour.

Back at immigration, I'm handed what feels like two thousand forms to fill out per passport, twelve passports in all, plus photocopies of everything. The usual haggling begins too, on top of an already steep fee of 2,020 pesos per visa.

Without a five-hundred note, I'd have needed passport photos and fingerprints for everyone — takes forever. I duck into the mall to check email, and, for the first time in years, buy a two-dollar pair of pants.

Just before immigration closes, I get the stamps. Valid until December 1st.

October 18, 2000

We anchor back near Davao today, and I put Ferdi in charge — by now all the mates know how to raise and drop anchor, each having done it at least once. I don't believe the captain should be the only one doing it; that's hoarding both the fun and the knowledge.

Too early for the port master meeting, I race by taxi to collect developed slide film in town — the sailing canoes from Manus, with their big square sails.

I eat lunch at a local spot, invited right into the family's house to eat it — the television blasting an American-style game show while Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and various saints preside from the wall above it.

I rest my head and fall asleep.

Meeting with the port master at 2:00 — we're assigned a berth for tomorrow.

The first dock proposed would have been a disaster; our small twenty-five-meter ship would have been swallowed by the gap between concrete and waterline. The alternative's better, though not great — doable, but with a concrete wall on one side. No room for error there.

I'd visited Shell earlier, but their lack of cooperation makes me abandon that route. Instead, Ronaldo, an old salt of a character, shows me around. We reach a petrol station, bypass the official permit process, and secure diesel and gas for tomorrow in under half an hour.

That evening, a party aboard — pasta, music, songs, joined by the crew from the Whitetip dive boat.

October 19, 2000

Wake at 6 a.m. We raise anchor for Sasa, having ordered fuel, water, gas ahead of time. We pass several sawmills, thousands of felled trees stacked up — sad to see, an entire forest laid out on a dock. Current against us, we're barely making three knots.

We approach a dock that turns out to be the wrong one — full speed ahead now, trying to make up lost time.

Steve drives the small boat, Rebecca on the dock to take the lines. We approach slowly, but the wind's pushing us toward the dock, so I go hard to starboard, hand on the throttle, then a quick correction to port.

The ship glides smoothly into position, kissing the dock gently. We miss the lines on the first pass, but she's in perfect position, needing a boost against the current — a tricky maneuver, a huge cargo ship ahead of us, a concrete wall behind.

Safe, I rush to get the diesel started.

We pump water aboard. "Best water in the world," the man tells us. We learn later, tasting the coffee, that it's actually heavily chlorinated — enough to make a face over.

We spill a little diesel in the process, which frustrates me — worried now about our water tanks.

By 1:00 we're undocking, formalities and the usual assortment of fees settled.

Full of water, diesel, and three barrels of gasoline for upcoming dive expeditions, we anchor back at Santa Ana wharf.

In town I visit Bebot to start the process of securing permission to visit Tubbataha.

Once again we talk the whole night through. He sets a blank canvas in front of me, and for the first time in months I pick up a brush — the artist in me stirring for half an hour somewhere else entirely. Dolphins appear on the canvas.

We share a sour fish soup, then start on banana brandy — the old seaman in each of us surfacing, trading stories from the sea.

October 20, 2000

A rush day getting the ship ready to sail. Stove pipe installed overnight.

Bebot visits with his son and partner. We sit quietly over Chinese takeout, and after dinner he sings a few songs — a tribute to Tubbataha, carried on the wind, and a song for seamen: once you're out there, you belong to the sea.

We spend half an hour after that getting the ship properly clean.

Voyage from Davao to Palawan

October 21, 2000

7 a.m. wake-up. A quick hug for Sam, just arrived on the wharf, and we're off.

Taxi! Two self-appointed bodyguards join me — George, insisting on carrying my folder, and his short-legged friend, nearly jogging to keep up with my fast Western pace.

Off to Sasa wharf for customs. Saturday — an old man with his daughter, in a red dress, calls an officer on standby. Now we wait.

We settle at the local refreshment spot, Norma's — a large Coke, three glasses, while a parade of curious girls drifts down the stairs. I suspect Norma's offers other services after dark.

We rest under a tree, kids playing on an iron fence nearby. We wait.

The old man rushes out — his boss, presumably, on the phone.

Taxi! Now crossing the entire town to meet the customs officer. We find him at a tennis court, just off the court, racket still in hand, a wig covering his half-bald head. He fires off a thousand questions, and when he asks about immigration clearance, I start talking faster, inventing a story about the extensions being sufficient. I don't have all the passports with me either, so I improvise a little sleight of hand — passports in, some back out, some shuffled — he can't see well without his glasses, and he's too proud to put them on.

Money changes hands, and suddenly the stamp appears from his tennis bag, formalities completed on the back of a boarding pass.

Could have taken two days. We're cleared to sail, and free.

Taxi! Racing to an internet café now. Copy, paste, copy, paste — a quick message to Gaie and Orla. My two "bodyguards" hover nearby; when the bill comes to eight pesos, they can hardly believe it.

Taxi! Santa Ana pier, please. A quick goodbye at the dive shop, kids shouting "Michel! Michel!" The small boat's waiting, and we're back aboard.

I put Maik in charge of raising anchor. By 1:00 we're heading south.

The passage through the Gulf of Davao turns into a maze of lights from fishing boats.

We pass close to a fishing platform, bamboo and palm leaf, built to attract fish that take shelter beneath it.

The sea has taken us back, and the grip of Davao city has finally let go — we're free again.

October 22, 2000

By sunrise, 6:00, we raise the main and foresail. Current against us, under engine we manage three knots.

We pass Cape San Agustin around 8:00, entering Pacific waters and the eight-thousand-fathom Philippine Trench.

The current keeps working against us; by afternoon the sea's glassy, smooth swells rolling through.

Wind picks up around 5:00, from the northwest — we're biting into the swells now.

Sunday-night speeches — not especially inspiring tonight, I have to admit, a certain reluctance to really seize the moment. Rich is already thinking about leaving

the ship, possibly after dry dock, and others cut their speeches short.

I have to duck below to check our course. We're sailing close to shore to escape the worst of the current. A cargo ship passes to starboard, giving us a chance to ask for a weather update — no depression forming, good news.

Stars come out; I hold our course against a fixed one. The ship speaks; I listen to the swells.

October 23, 2000

Wind and swells against us, painfully slow — two and a half knots. A cargo ship passes, exchanging weather info over the radio — all clear ahead.

The northwest monsoon is definitely settling in for good now.

Comments and observations turns heated when someone brings up the Rich-and-Riversong territorial issue. Rich blows up, and the discussion escalates. He hasn't been especially happy lately.

We watch *12 Monkeys* — a great film.

Sleep on deck, vivid dreams.

October 24, 2000

One tank of gas down; still slow, averaging around two and a half knots.

Cargo ships keep passing.

That evening, for Tuesday night, I attempt a presentation on cetaceans — species we might encounter in the Bohol Sea (Risso's dolphins, Fraser's dolphins, pygmy sperm whales, sperm whales, pilot whales, melon-headed whales, spotted and bottlenose and spinner dolphins, orcas, minke and humpback

whales), the geography of known sighting areas around Pamilacan, Dumaguete, Siquijor, Camiguin — a region sheltered from typhoons but reaching real depth, once home to a thriving whaling economy around Pamilacan Island. I go through the history of local versus industrial whaling, proper observation protocol at sea, our own resources for documenting sightings, and a code of ethics for any water encounters — how to approach without disrupting, letting the animal come to you rather than the reverse, and the value of casual conversation with local whale-watching operators and villagers to gather real information.

I don't talk much anymore about my own particular connection to them — it exposes too much, and there are always a few people eager to challenge it just for the sake of challenging. Unfortunately, all the talk of conservation and living together and love comes through so differently once you dig past the surface — it's often possession being discussed, not love. The way some approach a whale encounter feels almost predatory, not meaning harm exactly, but still taking something from the moment that wasn't offered.

And for that, I'll push back where I can — though I know it costs energy better spent elsewhere. Territory again. The people shouting loudest about peace are often the most aggressive underneath. I'm tired of a certain performative gentleness that's really just a strategy for seduction — something darker brewing beneath it, surfacing now and then. I should watch myself too, honestly — noticing my own instinct to protect the people I love, a little possessiveness creeping in, not wanting a private moment interrupted.

We're motoring now, four knots, current maybe half a knot. Studying charts and pilot books — we should reach the Hinatuan Passage tomorrow, though our timing likely won't be perfect for it. I mark possible anchorages along the way. Tides matter enormously here; against

us, currents in some spots can reach seven knots — well beyond what we could push through.

Can't sleep. A strange loneliness tonight, tangled up with this evening's discussion — alone in this particular quest, I suppose. I overhear Rich's read on my talk — that I'm doing it to somehow monopolize any encounter that comes along. Well, friend — all I'm really after is not letting a real opportunity slip by unused.

October 25, 2000

Around 7:00 we approach the first stretch of the Hinatuan Passage. A cargo ship passes, radio chatter between us.

A four-to-five-knot westerly current runs around Rasa Island; we push on at four knots.

Most of the morning, and part of the night, spent buried in the pilot book and charts, hunting possible anchorages.

A Filipino banca, towing five canoes, fishes the strait, octopus held high — we wave and continue on.

Around a shallow flat, twelve meters, our speed drops to three knots. Clear we won't make the second passage today.

I doze off for an hour, and a vivid, unsettling dream comes — the ship transformed, stripped of her systems, overrun by strangers indifferent to my calls for help, decorated absurdly for some celebration I don't understand, dancers slowly tearing pieces off her as I struggle to keep her moving.

I wake up.

We need to anchor — the water around Hinatuan Island runs too deep, forty-four meters. I opt for Cagusan Bay instead. Current's with us now, but navigation proves

difficult; we lower sails and I bounce constantly between GPS, chart, and deck. Overcast and drizzling since noon; Steve can barely see anything from the masthead.

The bay's fringed with reef, the anchorage tucked right in the middle of it. Hard work at the helm — constant small corrections, the ship weaving like something docking on the moon, the current refusing any straight line.

We finally reach the spot. On the chart it looks like a clean approach, but I know we zigzagged the whole way — strange, watching the bow point straight at a reef while actually tracking forty degrees off it.

Good practice for tomorrow, passing near Rasa Island through the Hinatuan Passage proper.

Rich carries an air of wanting to take charge, somewhat combative about it — I have to work with that, not easy. I also know no one else can really feel what's running through my head right now; I sense things without always knowing exactly how to act on them. Reacting outright would only create conflict we can't afford at the moment. So I stay quiet.

Sensitive to every shift in tone, every subtle undercurrent — occasionally overwhelmed by it all.

Why can't people just be simple sometimes? Complicated, tangled minds — why?

The West has bred real genius, but at what cost — no one ever quite satisfied, something always creeping in to complicate an otherwise straightforward task.

Conditioned, and not even aware of it.

The crew seems relaxed, easygoing, not fully grasping how demanding the navigation's actually been. But why should they worry — it's ultimately my responsibility. Others want to get more involved, which is good, but it

takes real openness to actually learn from it, not just reaction or self-interest, but genuine curiosity.

October 26, 2000

The sound of insects and birds replaces the engine's roar now. A dark, moonless, starless night — beautifully dark. Under the anchor light's glow, I set three cushions on the bow and finally rest, properly rest, filling my mind with sound — a rainstorm hitting the leaves of the island forest, its own kind of song.

I wake with first light, an overcast morning, sunlight finding a crack between clouds to light up the coastal village — thatched roofs glowing, coconut palms standing like soldiers, catching what sun they can.

We raise anchor at 6:30. High tide will hit around 9:50. The ship handles well, threading tight channels. I hear myself asking the usual questions — distance to shore, heading, tracking — but really it's the senses doing the work.

We approach Rasa Island, and our speed drops — four knots, then three. Already eddies and current visible around us. A mile off Rasa, we're barely moving at all; the helm struggles to hold a course, constant adjustment needed.

Radar fixes by Sam — she does a great job. Rich's on the ball too, sarcastic as ever, some cultural trait I suppose, though I'm not really in the mood for jokes right now.

Hyper-aware, I feel the ship and her crew intensely. Aside from those on watch, everyone else is in Nemo's watching a movie, while outside the sky darkens and wind picks up.

We're crawling, under a knot even pushing 1500 RPM. We need to clear this bottleneck before the tide reaches

full strength; our next real window won't come until 3:40.

We finally break free, heading toward a bay away from the passage's center to dodge the worst eddies and current. It works — speed jumps to four knots.

The moment we exit the Surigao Strait proper, speed suddenly leaps to 5.8 knots.

Unfortunately, for any cetacean-watching, the weather's turned overcast, wind from the southwest, and no sign of easing soon. Moderate swells make the going less than comfortable.

With the pressure off, I finally relax a little and get back to work on the RVH homepage — slowly taking shape, usually my evening project.

Entering the Bohol Sea.

I climb the mast for a better view, and suddenly it's 360 degrees of action — fins everywhere. First a pod of what might be melon-headed whales, then dolphins off the stern. Later, pilot whales sighted off the bow, a group crossing our path but diving as we pass through their track. Then a pod of Fraser's dolphins, a dozen maybe, leaping clear of the water, their distinctively marked heads unmistakable. In the distance, larger shapes — whales or big dolphins — breach against the silvered sky and sea.

I'm in heaven.

We hold a course of 260 degrees, six knots, rainstorms trailing both ahead and behind. All the cetaceans seem to be moving north — mild swells make positive identification tricky, but it feels like a real superhighway out here, so many fins visible from the masthead, some clearly larger whales among them, though I'm too overwhelmed to properly track it all.

A lone dolphin off the stern, and that's the last of it — we're heading into rain now.

They seem to be feeding on the incoming Pacific current — this is, after all, the Philippines' gateway from the Pacific, the same route Magellan used on his way to Cebu.

I'm aware Rich carries some resentment toward me lately, sharp sarcastic comments, running on deck with the sheet I've already prepared, or trying repeatedly to take things over. What worries me most isn't the friction itself but the possibility it reshapes Riversong too, since the two are inseparable now — and I don't know what that means for my own friendship with her.

I needed this moment with the whales — a real charge of energy, a sign I'm on the right path. I won't stop noticing the friction, the scrutiny, but at least right now, I'm simply here, enjoying it.

The sea offers gifts, and I'm eager to receive them — like a lover reading into every hint, even imagined ones, warming the heart, the soul regardless. My eyes stay sharp, sometimes too sharp; I can't share everything I sense, partly because it wouldn't help, mostly because few are truly open to hearing it. Everyone, in their way, teaches me something about people — a constant, quiet study of what I might be missing. Some days it nearly drives me mad, though I keep that mostly to myself.

Tonight we read **The Little Prince** aloud. Took me five years to finally bring the book out — I've been dreaming of turning it into a play, the little prince traveling by sea instead, visiting different islands, meeting characters echoing the book's own cast — the fox reimagined as a dolphin or whale, woven through with more oceanic scenes.

5:30 — sky darkening but not yet fully black. On the bow, dolphins play like something out of myth, trails of

bioluminescence marking their path, an almost sensual quality to it tonight — pairs moving together, patterns forming as night deepens, the trail growing brighter, more distinct. Jesse plays guitar, and for once the whole deck falls silent — too much, for once, for words.

For a full hour the dolphins hold us entranced, watching, like the little prince himself, mesmerized by real beauty.

Long after they're gone, the peace lingers — a tingling in the body, something like inner quiet restored.

October 27, 2000

Wind picked up and never dropped — gray, everywhere gray. Swells hit the bow, top speed maybe three knots. Some seasickness starting to spread. I can't find anywhere restful, so I retreat to my bunk — the engine's vibration keeps me half-awake, dreams vivid though already fading by the time I try to recall them.

On deck, drizzle, the gray persisting. Sails stay down; they'd only suffer in this.

Twelve miles off the coast of Bohol — not much shelter available with wind dead out of the west, and Dumaguete rated poorly as an anchorage in the pilot book. Two tanks of diesel down already — we may need to refuel before Palawan.

So I consider Cebu City for restocking instead.

Wind gusting to thirty knots, heavy swells building, hitting us straight on from 260 degrees. I dig through the pilot charts for alternatives — Camiguin, possibly, for anchorage.

Then I find a clearer chart of Bohol's south coast — two possible anchorages there, sheltered from the swells. We decide on Duero, nine miles off. It's 8:00 p.m. now, so the strategy becomes moving as slowly as possible

toward it, given the current running north-northwest — we steer 260 with a track closer to 340.

Pamilacan sits thirty miles off. The Navtex beeps a warning — a severe tropical storm, a hundred and twenty miles north of us, slightly east.

The barometer's dropped from 1008 to 1001.5 — possibly the storm pulling wind toward it.

I picture us stripped of radar and GPS entirely, or without the engine — better to simply wait out the shift in wind. We're burning fuel and time now; a good sailing run could have covered as much ground as four days of motoring.

Attempting the Sulu Sea crossing in these conditions isn't really viable either — swells, current, and wind together would form a wall the Heraclitus can't push through.

I cook dinner in a rocking galley, feeling slightly off, checking our course every five minutes.

During the ship's meeting I call for a general cleanup — things have gotten messy, sleeping bodies scattered everywhere, Nemo's starting to resemble a scout dormitory.

Everyone, I think, got a wake-up call too, partly for missing the Rasa passage entirely by watching a video during the critical moment — the resulting frustration and grumbling carried well past the meeting itself.

I've mentioned before how sharp my senses have felt lately — plenty of people showing signs of seasickness. The weather doesn't leave room for complaint, and this was a call that had to be made.

Rich is doing well — in a real emergency, he's fully present, fully focused.

Watching for the "enemy," the Navtex keeps feeding us updates — the tropical storm now at 12.6°N, 126.6°E, a hundred and sixty miles from our position. It's already capsized a fishing boat with eleven crew aboard, winds of fifty miles per hour at its center, moving west, closing the distance to us.

I remember cursing the Navtex earlier; now we wait anxiously for its next update.

Our SSB radio's transmitter is faulty, leaving us without proper weather forecasts for now.

Rich, Maik, Sam, and I keep constant watch on the situation. No sign of the wind weakening. I consider setting both fisherman anchors as extra insurance if the storm draws closer.

October 28, 2000

Midnight, three miles off shore — constant vigilance needed, the current pushing us northeast. Swells run high; only around 4:30 a.m. do we get any real break.

Can't sleep — senses on alert, catching every word, every sound. I lie down on the command room bunk. A long night. I catch half an hour around 3:30, after baking bread and putting together a proper breakfast, plus a shot from the captain's locker.

The day breaks in gorgeous color, and I manage twenty minutes of sleep before we begin our approach.

A barge sits anchored half a mile off the coast.

I send Rich out on a local canoe to sound depths while the boat team lowers our own tender — no formal wake-up call needed, just working with whoever's already up. We weave between fishing buoys and drop anchor in record time, a small reverse boost, then I jump on the small boat over to the barge.

I bring the video camera to film their charts up close, then ask, half-joking, if I might buy one outright. Miraculously they have two spare. After some negotiation and seaman's talk, we settle on eight hundred pesos — they're leaving right then, so Maik heads back to the ship while I hang onto this priceless cargo as they raise their own anchor. The whole missing stretch of route, finally, in proper detail.

Back aboard, a quick strat command to review and lock in our plan through to Palawan.

Schedule, October 28 - November 26: Bohol to Puerto Princesa, Palawan

October 28 — anchor at Duero, south Bohol coast. October 29 — leave Duero 4:00 p.m. for Pamilacan (forty nautical miles). October 30 — anchor Pamilacan, 7:00 a.m., set up. November 1-4 — dive and whale-watching expeditions, land visits. November 5 — leave for Cabilao via Balicasag (thirty-five nautical miles). November 6-7 — dive Cabilao. November 8 — leave for Cebu City (thirty-five nautical miles). November 9-10 — Cebu City, clear customs, provision, fuel. November 11-12 — Cebu City, Mactan Island. November 13 — leave for Cabilao (thirty-five nautical miles). November 14 — Cabilao to the coast of Siquijor/Negros, whale-watching en route (sixty-five nautical miles), then two hundred ten nautical miles on to Tubbataha. November 15-18 — passage, possible diving. November 19 — anchor at Tubbataha Reef. November 20-23 — dive study at Tubbataha. November 24 — leave for Puerto Princesa (ninety nautical miles). November 25-26 — passage, arrive Puerto Princesa.

Then I crash — asleep by 10:30, waking at 3:00.

Stepping onto land, I fall into conversation with a fisherman. Catches are thin these days; tonight he'll set nets right off the beach.

"How many fish in a night?"

"Fifty pieces or so — sells for fifty pesos at market."

He lives right on the pebbled beach. We sit by his boat, watching the sea.

I drive to Jagna, the next town over — a busy little port, a huge passenger ferry docked at the main pier, vendors crowding every inch around it. The town's clean; I stop by the church, mass in progress, in English. A quick shrimp tempura snack, a Coke from a street stall, watching jeepneys roll past.

In the market, men and women get groomed — feet, nails, hair, massage — beauty shops papered with fashion magazine clippings, the role models to imitate.

I hurry back before dark to sit again with the fisherman, his nets already out, watching the tide come in.

Drizzle sends us to shelter; rain sings on the thatched roofs.

I learn the people of Pamilacan were still catching whales as recently as last year. The area's now protected, an attempt to let the sea rest and recover — no one permitted there.

We sit in silence, watching the Heraclitus glow like a small city from this distance.

And a city she is — we've caught something of the local rhythm ourselves lately, noise, loud voices. I find myself wishing quiet held more value here. Culturally, aside from silent meals, no one seems able to sit beside another person without talking. A naturally social people, or perhaps just wary of silence.

The crew returns thoroughly drunk, Jesse especially, collapsing in the command room — a drinking problem worth naming plainly by now.

I announce that no one dives the next day if they've been drunk and out of control the night before. Alcohol here is absurdly cheap, cheaper than a Coke or bottled water.

October 29, 2000

5:30 sunrise. By 6:00 we're ashore, and I catch the first westbound transport — a jeepney blasting cheerful pop songs, and a love song that has me thinking of Orla. The sea's flat calm, fishing canoes dotting the low tide's exposed shoreline.

I step off in Lila. In 1994, the last Bryde's whale taken here washed ashore right at the fishing pier, already being cut up for the town's lunch by the time word got around.

At the pier, old men wait, their eyes carrying real knowledge of the sea. They eye me warily, especially once I ask about whales.

No, they haven't seen any in a long while. Once they paraded through the deeper water regularly; not anymore. There's a clear nostalgia in how they talk about the old whaling days — genuinely exciting work, no whale taken without a real fight, sometimes lasting three or four days.

Whaling arrived here in the 1800s, introduced during the Yankee whaling era, when a hundred to two hundred whales a year were taken before the operations moved on once stocks thinned, leaving their bloody knowledge behind as an unintended gift. Locals picked up the practice themselves, and by the 1960s it had become firmly established among the people of Pamilacan.

An old man paddles his outrigger toward shore, fishing nets bundled at the stern, and lashed across the bow, the two extended wings of a manta ray.

He drags her onto the rocks — huge, speared through the head. A machete slices through her wings on the rock, muscle still twitching, blood pooling and staining the water nearby. Once both wings are cut free and carried up to the fishing stall for sale, someone else cleans out the remaining guts, standing in a pool of blood by the end. The head stays on the rock a while longer. I find myself imagining her gaze somehow still on me — you've seen how graceful we are, circling and dancing around divers in the Maldives.

A man with one eye and one leg — likely a bomb-fishing accident, though I don't dare ask — sells pieces of the manta from a wooden chair nearby.

It feels like something out of an old fisherman's tale.

Everywhere along the road, huge mats lie out drying copra and rice — it hasn't been sunny in a while, so even the basketball courts get pressed into service.

A slice of Bohol itself is being mined three miles from shore, a conveyor track running fuel and cargo straight onto a ship's hold.

The channel between Tagbilaran City and Panglao is dotted with fish traps and stakes.

I pass the fishing market — shrimp, mackerel, tuna, reef fish, though nothing in real abundance — and catch a bus back toward Baclayon.

We cross the Loay River; every village along the way has a striking church.

In Baclayon, the oldest town in Bohol, I step into the Parish Church of the Immaculate Conception, the oldest church in the Philippines, built in 1595.

Swifts fly through the otherwise silent interior.

Mass starts early across Bohol — in Duero, everyone attends at 6:00 a.m.

I sit for a while, watching light filter through tinted glass, catching on the images and symbols throughout.

San Clemente is the patron saint of fishermen here, celebrated on November 23rd.

Then I visit the town's small museum — intricate priestly vestments, statues of Christ, the Virgin, various saints, and carved ivory eggs, likely from sperm whale teeth, on display.

The people of Pamilacan travel here for church. They've set up a small shop advertising whale and dolphin watching tours now. I chat with a flamboyant man who used to live on Pamilacan — a Japanese visitor once wrote an article about the island. Not many whales these days, but dolphins year-round; locals call one particular feeding spot "the dolphins' restaurant." About two hundred families live on the island.

A hop-and-drop sequence through five different jeepneys carries me back toward Duero. In Valencia, running short on time, I hire a motorbike and tell the driver to go fast — I make the pickup with two minutes to spare, after covering a hundred kilometers.

We raise anchor at 4:00 p.m. I put Sam in charge — conditions are ideal, and she handles it beautifully. We watch **One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest**, and after dinner dolphins appear briefly off the starboard side. We're sailing at 3.3 knots against small, uncomfortable swells, not much of a bow wave to speak of.

October 30, 2000

2:30 a.m. — loud blows, dolphins surrounding the ship, coming and going from the bow for over an hour and a half, jumping, leaping, their echolocation loud as they hunt.

6:30 — whales. Karen spots a spout in the distance, the unmistakable blow of a sperm whale. She surfaces three times, showing us her tail before diving. Then a whole parade begins — not close to the ship, but everything passing by. More sperm whale spouts, Risso's dolphins slicing the water with their tall dorsal fins, three separate pods of a dozen or more cruising past. I'm ecstatic, especially catching another sperm whale's dive.

The show winds down around 8:00.

We head toward the seventeen-hundred-and-twenty-eight-meter depth mark; en route, a pod of long-snouted spinner dolphins rides the bow for a few minutes, a few spectacular leaps in the distance. We heave to three and a half miles off Pamilacan — the sun would be dead in our eyes for any closer approach right now.

A swim stop, though everyone's a little too loud for a little too long — no real tolerance for silence today. I slip into the blue regardless.

We approach Pamilacan around noon. I take the small boat to scout an anchorage, but everything's simply too close to the reef.

The village looks striking from a distance, outriggers lined along a white sand beach.

We pass an outrigger with a man spearfishing, his three- or four-year-old daughter perched on the bow in a straw hat.

We can't find anywhere I'd feel safe sleeping — if we swing at all here, we'd be in real trouble. So we adopt a voyage mode instead: approach the island for daytime diving, head back out to open water overnight. Safer, and it puts us in good position at dawn for any passing cetaceans too.

Sam isn't thrilled with the plan, though I don't think she fully appreciates what a bad anchorage would mean. I

also know this crew tends to relax the moment we're tied to solid ground — this way, we stay genuinely sea people, good practice for similar situations down the road. The nervousness, I think, mostly comes from unfamiliarity with operating this way.

We send out a first dive while I stay aboard — with everyone having dived at least once already, I can afford to be less strictly democratic if a real cetacean encounter comes up.

Weather picks up, wind from the southwest — we'd have been in real trouble anchored near the reef in that. The divers return through rough seas, having broken a mooring buoy in the process, so I head quickly to the village to apologize and properly introduce us.

Pamilacan sits on old reef geology; the village itself right on the beach, a hundred boats and their gear tended, worked on, or simply resting there.

People here don't seem especially interested in us.

I walk the beach hoping to find an English speaker — Leon, our contact through Bebot, lives in another village. I explain our intentions, take a few photos, look for traces of the old whaling tradition — whale bones repurposed as net supports, a dried dolphin fluke on one wall, a picture of Christ hanging beside it.

In another hut, something like a trophy room — shark jaws, a nearly complete dolphin skeleton with dried flesh still clinging to it. Macabre. The houses themselves look like piles of scrap; genuine poverty here — no shop, no electricity, no fresh water, fishing gear scattered everywhere. I speak with an old man who wants me to stay a while.

Three young men cook four small fish directly on a coconut husk — no rice, no taro, nothing else alongside it.

Not much grows here — barely any trees, just scrub taking hold in the cracks of old limestone.

From a distance, the beach had looked like paradise; up close, it's littered with trash and broken netting.

I don't think everyone here welcomes my presence — I can read it in their eyes. Perhaps they've faced enough judgment already over a way of life that included whale hunting.

What alternative is there, really? Tourism, maybe, eventually.

We return to the ship through heavy swells, the scene almost painterly. Then we motor out toward deeper water, positioning ourselves for the morning's chance at passing sperm whales.

October 31, 2000

5:30, sunrise. The sea's still choppy, not ideal for spotting cetaceans. I spend an hour at the masthead without luck.

The small boat's sprung a leak — decision needed on whether to keep diving with it or pull it for repairs.

We head to Pamilacan's northwest side for a dive — beautiful formations, healthy coral starting around forty feet, though the reef top itself is bare, blasted out to about twenty-five feet.

Plenty of encrusting invertebrate life in the crevasses, juvenile fish everywhere — this section's a designated sanctuary.

Surfacing, a man waits in a banca. "Diving isn't allowed here — you need to see the barangay captain," the village chief.

I climb aboard his boat while the divers head back to the ship; the second team will follow with some payment.

The village, near some old fort ruins, is kept remarkably clean — unlike the settlement on the southern side.

We sit on the grass and talk conservation. I write a note acknowledging we hadn't realized the sanctuary prohibited diving.

He explains they used to allow it, but since the area serves as a fish nursery, too many divers disturb the breeding grounds. Plenty of people still try to break the rule, so catching us, in a way, is a good sign the enforcement's working.

Only recently has whaling here actually stopped, and even that, he admits, he's not entirely convinced of. A single whale can support a family for three months — meaning, in theory, four whales a year per family, multiplied across however many families remain active. So, officially, a full ban now covers both whales and the dolphins regularly taken for food — a genuinely difficult subject for a community whose men have hunted for three or four generations, their whole livelihood built on it. What else could they realistically turn to? The reef's already been stripped bare. It's rarely understood, he adds, why anyone would dive without catching or collecting something — much like we wouldn't wander a supermarket purely to look. Naturally, they're suspicious of us.

We dive next with Heather on a training dive along a sandy slope, thick with soft coral, wild formations, a strong current. We drop to sixty feet — she does wonderfully. Lionfish, clouds of anthias, unicornfish, surgeonfish, a sea anemone hosting at least a dozen different clownfish species, gobies scattered across the rubble. A great dive.

Back aboard, we raise the small boat for repair — my suggestion of plastic and glue over the puncture, then reinflating, holds for six hours straight.

Tonight's Halloween, though I'm not really in the mood for more noise. I watch *2001: A Space Odyssey* — genuinely inspiring — and everyone else dresses up for the evening, though energy runs low. Ferdi and I start up some music instead — accordion, flutes, didgeridoo, and the new drum Sam brought back.

Rain sets in, wind from the west, southwest. The Navtex keeps feeding updates — every low-pressure system and typhoon carefully tracked, their movements logged. This steady westerly wind worries me a little, though; we still need to cross the Sulu Sea to reach Puerto Princesa, and this wind would make that crossing genuinely unpleasant.

November 1, 2000

Engine on as I wake at 3:30 — a miscommunication has us heading toward Balicasag Island instead. We heave to and wait for morning, planning to dive the Cervera Shoal.

The Cervera Shoal sits four miles south of Panglao Island, four miles west of Pamilacan.

A mile out, we lower the small boat, and Maik and I check the shoal — rubble on top, clear on all sides. We anchor right on it, a strange, wonderful feeling, alone in the middle of open water.

First dive: Steve, Rebecca, Dave, and me. We drop onto the top, gradually working deeper along the sandy slope. I spot three golden morays tucked in crevasses.

The reef top's overgrown with algae, and we count at least ten crown-of-thorns starfish. But pockets of real

richness remain — thick with anthias, brittle stars, crinoids everywhere.

Along the slope, a school of surgeonfish, lionfish scattered about, and the real find of the dive — an enormous banded sea snake, coiled asleep around a coral head.

Patches of bright fluorescent-red anemone host their resident clownfish. Pufferfish, cornetfish, damselfish everywhere. Even a red coral trout, a real rarity given how heavily fished this reef's been. A beautiful dive overall, scenic despite everything — the reef's clearly been blasted repeatedly, which only concentrates what fish remain into the few intact structures left.

For the next dive, Heather can't equalize, so I go with Ferdi instead, staying on the reef top — thoroughly destroyed by blast fishing, though ironically the surviving structures teem with life: multicolored crinoids, every kind of soft coral, clouds of anthias, pufferfish, hawkfish, cardinalfish, anemones with their clownfish tenants. Two huge, well-camouflaged scorpionfish, lionfish tucked under nearly every ledge, two sea snakes, a meter and a half long each. Bright nudibranchs, gobies, golden moray eels — a lovely dive, the outcrops so scenic I wish I'd brought the camera.

That afternoon, from the ship, we watch a fisherman blast-fishing nearby — he doesn't catch anything.

Wind picking up, we squeeze in one last dive. I go with Rebecca; the camera battery dies partway, so I shoot with ambient light instead, the overcast sky not helping much. We sight seven sea snakes foraging — one comes directly toward me, and even knowing a single bite could kill, I don't feel threatened, following it a while, drawn to a bright red anemone nearby. We come across an empty fish trap, a small moray, the inevitable anthias — quite a swim between each pocket of life.

We'd all dived straight off the ship, but on surfacing the wind's picked up and we're dragging anchor — a piece of coral wedged under it, anchor flipped upside down. I let out three hundred feet of chain, hoping the weight holds us; we're still dragging slightly. I set up a shackled rope as backup in case conditions worsen, then head down myself with hammer and chisel to work the rock free — the second time today in the bosun's locker. That morning I'd also rigged a buoy and line for drift diving.

I put together a page on the "Snake Reef" dive site for the website, and argue a little with Sam about all the talk of "science" happening with nothing actually collected or written down yet.

That morning there'd also been an argument between Rich and Maik over how many people the small boat can safely carry — and afterward Rich opts out of diving entirely, tending instead to Riversong, who's dealing with some kind of infection. We don't see either of them all day. They've retreated into their own little world, and I don't think it's doing either of them much good — Riversong does nothing without Rich these days, including diving, and Rich does nothing without her either.

I raise my voice a little, trying to inject some energy back into the day — barely any ship's work getting done, a shame it takes someone pushing to make that happen. Rich just wants as much time with Riversong as he can get.

Enough complaining, though — we're diving, in a genuinely wild spot, five miles from the nearest land, anchored and, somehow, safe.

November 2, 2000

Early wake-up as usual, 6:00. Dolphins feeding less than a hundred meters from the ship, resurfacing in the same

spot for nearly forty-five minutes before another pod passes by. They keep their distance from the hull — understandable, given their history with humans in this region; trust doesn't come easily.

A spinner performs a few high leaps I manage to catch on camera.

Once the boat's lowered, I go looking, but they've slipped away.

Jason and I check the anchor — dragged badly, still snagged on the same rock. I bring down hammer and chisel, free the top section, and flip the anchor over, to the apparent delight of the local wrasses and goatfish.

We dive straight off the chain, down to ninety feet, then back up the slope to thirty, focusing on anemones. We spot a sea snake feeding. An easy dive.

That afternoon, a two-hour science meeting to log our observations and, hopefully, draft something for the website.

Strat feels a little strange — everyone unused to operating with so little formal structure. We rework the schedule, planning to leave in the morning for Balicasag Island, nine miles west. We need to sharpen our communication.

I'm learning that no matter what you do, it won't sit right with everyone. So I hold my tongue rather than let frustration take over.

November 3, 2000

We raise anchor without trouble, though all the mates stay on standby in case it doesn't go smoothly. The rock's clear, and we set course for Balicasag Island. By 9:00 the boat's down and I go ashore to clear us with the local authorities, paying a small ten-dollar fee for the full day's diving.

On the beach, a Japanese dive operator greets me, his boat anchored right at the drop-off, some fifteen Japanese tourists buying shells and necklaces from vendors — beautiful shells, including six golden cowries on one tray, a real find for collectors.

"How much?" I ask.

"Normally 2,500 pesos for Japanese tourists. For you, since you come from the sea — 1,500."

Still nearly forty US dollars each. I explain I don't collect anything.

Buoys mark every reef top around the island — anchoring's prohibited here. Diving is genuinely big business, and the protection's clearly working. Even off-season, four boats visit daily.

The first dive goes in — the reef top pristine, dropping off into blue, every reef fish species present. Ninety percent hard coral coverage, real diversity — even without being a coral specialist, I count forty distinct species.

The wall's thick with sponges, soft coral, hydroids in every color combination. Lionfish tucked under ledges, schools of unicornfish, fusiliers, angelfish, trumpetfish, triggerfish, snapper shoals. We're genuinely overwhelmed. Five batfish emerge from the blue; a tuna cruises past now and then, silver fish schooling everywhere. The weather's perfect, flat calm, and we heave to half a mile off the island.

Five dives planned for today.

The second dive mirrors the first, along the same wall — half of it spent around sixty to seventy feet. I drop to a hundred to film a school of big-eye trevally circling curiously around me, good footage. We finish shallow, near the drop-off, where anemones host eight different clownfish species, and a well-camouflaged stonefish sits nearby.

I'm properly hooked on the camera again, chasing images more than deliberate footage, experimenting with light and angle. Learning as I go.

Ferdi, Dave, and Jesse join me for a late dive around 4:30 — fish everywhere, frantic activity across the reef top, anthias, chromis, herds of rudderfish, needlefish. Along the slope I wait patiently for humpback unicornfish to approach; moorish idols, filefish, parrotfish, various wrasses drift past. Soft coral everywhere, a few giant sea fans hinting at how fierce the current can get here.

Back at the ship, a pod of dolphins in sight; earlier, from the masthead, I'd already spotted a whale's blow, and the diving crew separately sighted a sperm whale just three hundred meters from the ship.

At night, dolphins cruise past, hunting.

November 4, 2000

A rude wake-up — a big cargo ship bearing down on us. Engine on! Someone to the helm, RPM up. It passes two hundred meters off. Apparently it's been a wild night, a ring of lights around us the whole time, big ships passing through — I hear the stories in the morning and I'm frustrated no one woke me.

Dolphins were with us constantly, feeding around the ship, loud blows, several pods keeping us on our toes.

With first light, safer waters, and I'm up at 5:30 — another short night.

We sail half a mile off Balicasag, and the first dive goes in at 9:00 — a beautiful wall, my focus mostly on coral this time, though I can never resist a clownfish encounter. Schools of bannerfish, unicornfish; Jesse and Dave spot an octopus.

I download the images right away — thirty species of coral logged.

Second dive: Heather and Sam together on the wall while I spend most of my time watching fish in one spot — a big black snapper drifts in to inspect, fusiliers cruising the wall steadily, damselfish, unicornfish, a mackerel passing through.

Not a single shark sighted here yet, not even a reef shark — likely fished out long ago.

Third dive at 4:00 — a sandy bottom studded with coral heads, and in the distance, a huge shape: a school of meter-and-a-half barracuda, hundreds strong. I swim right into the middle of them, and they form a perfect circle around me. I follow for fifteen minutes, close enough that everywhere I turn, they're there — the school so tightly packed there's no blue visible behind them. I resist the urge to use my light, never sure what that might trigger. Then a huge mackerel passes through.

Deeper, a few decent-sized groupers, the rest of the dive spent on smaller life — a crown-of-thorns creeping across otherwise healthy coral, a juvenile lionfish hunting over a table coral. We surface healthy, excited, happy.

Sweetlips, snapper shoals, batfish, fusiliers, small tuna, trevally, filefish, pufferfish — all present. The sun sets as we head back.

I decide to move the ship out of the channel, seeking shelter on the north side of Panglao, away from tide and shipping traffic.

Sleep well.

All the mates are becoming genuine seamen now — holding course, piloting, making calls on their own. I mostly just set the overall plan these days. Sam, Ferdi, Maik, and Rich all in serious training mode, and everyone learning from it.

This morning, for the first time, wind blows from the north — a good sign. Without it, crossing the Sulu Sea would be genuinely difficult.

November 5, 2000

Sheltered from wind that's swung back to the southwest, we approach Duljo Point, on Panglao's northwest side.

Morning meeting on deck — a full day of diving and theater planned, split into two groups, each preparing a piece for tomorrow's actors' dinner.

First dive: a wall thick with invertebrate growth, though too many local fishing boats around for much in the way of big fish — pelagics do pass through occasionally, trolling bancas nearby suggest as much. I focus on smaller subjects instead, building out our growing photo collection. The reef top's mostly boulder and seagrass, good for spotting wrasse. Tunicates, soft coral, sponges — a real invertebrate-focused dive.

For the final dive we head to a sandy slope, finding two scorpionfish and adding more to the coral collection. A nice, mellow dive, drifting from one small scene to the next.

A purple soft coral sways to life in the current. I settle at the edge, watching what passes — a mackerel, bannerfish. I sneak up on a lizardfish resting in the sand.

The reef's a sandy slope with patches of seagrass, dropping gently to about eighty feet.

I cook Sunday dinner — quite a Sunday, everyone still buzzing about the diving, the mood excellent, laughter enough to leave my sides aching. Most people share their very first diving memories, Jason's story taking the crown for hilarity.

I miss Orla, but I'm kept plenty busy, channeling that energy into the ship and the reefs instead.

Tomorrow, Cabilao — a famous spot for hammerhead sightings during December and January. We're a little early, but we'll give it a shot regardless.

November 6, 2000

After dinner, I process the day's images, clearing space on the computer for the next batch.

The inverters run steadily, charging batteries — a small window into how much power capturing these scenes actually requires. A subtle transfer of energy, in the end.

We head for Cabilao, up by 6:00 after only four hours' sleep, deciding to squeeze in an early dive. Rich, Jesse, Dave, and I go, Karen tending and thrilled to spend time in the shallows for once. We drop onto the wall — the reef top thick with soft coral, dropping to a sandy plateau where more soft coral bends visibly under the strong tidal current, a genuinely wild landscape. Then another wall, plunging into deep water; we hang for a few minutes at a hundred and forty feet, staring into the blue, hoping for hammerheads. None appear, but the landscape alone is majestic.

We ascend gradually toward the reef top, eyes still on the blue the whole way — clouds of small silvery fish dancing in the light, dodging our bubbles, unicornfish schooling past.

We finish the dive in fifteen feet of water, quiet, happy, thoroughly intoxicated by the blue.

For my second dive we drop further up the point and drift toward the plateau — down a sandy slope to eighty feet, then a wall rising to a garden of purple soft coral, swimming through a school of bannerfish before finishing shallow at fifteen feet. A pipefish spotted in the sand.

I go ashore — two dive shops here, both empty. No hammerhead sightings since 1996, the site's reputation resting entirely on old memories now. A few faded photographs of a hammerhead school stand as evidence of what this place has lost.

Unable to find a proper chart, we plan to follow a cargo ship's route with the small boat instead.

A third dive on the southern side — the fish here entirely gone, ten canoes waiting at the drop-off for a catch that never comes. The reef top's freshly blasted, maybe a day old. One section's set aside as a sanctuary — a word carrying real weight here now, something people are genuinely conscious of, especially with a guard actively watching over it.

November 7, 2000

Last day of our diving marathon. We start with lab — haven't done it in a week, and it feels wonderful, simply observing my breath, listening to my heartbeat, letting attention spiral gently outward.

I study the chart for Cebu Harbor's entrance, though I can't locate the chart I'd filmed off the cargo ship earlier. I turn my thoughts to Palawan for a while instead.

First dive on a wall — two ghost pipefish tucked in a crevasse, coaxed gently into the strobe's light, then a lionfish perched on red coral, all good scenes. Soft coral everywhere, every shape and color. More shots. Dancing gobies in a reef tunnel, playing hide-and-seek while their host shrimp digs busily nearby; a bright yellow trumpetfish drifts out of the blue.

Not much attention on open water this dive.

Final dive of the marathon: Heather's certification dive — she's entirely comfortable by now. I test the Nikonos

with its strobe, finally repaired by Rich after two years of sitting broken.

He's in an odd mood lately — not really pushing for the ship's sake. As Synesthesia manager, he hasn't been calling lab sessions, and Riversong seems weak right now too.

The sea's like a mirror, reflecting an overcast sky. It pours in the afternoon, and I sleep through steady rain that night. Dolphin blows wake me briefly around 4 a.m. — always around, even when we can't see them.

Cebu City, Philippines

November 8, 2000

We start motoring at midnight, wind picking up from the north this time.

By 5:30 we approach Talisay town, at the edge of Cebu Harbour — a few cargo ships anchored in twenty to thirty meters of water.

Without proper charts, I decide to anchor here and head into town for a chart and to clear us in.

I'm dropped at a fishing village, last night's rain flooding the whole area — knee-deep mud the whole way to the main road. When it rains here, it really rains.

Kids splash in the pools, men mend nets on a polluted beach, smoke already rising from cooking fires.

I catch a jeepney into Cebu City proper — real culture shock, traffic jams, smoke, noise everywhere. I step out near the terminal and walk toward the harbor, find an internet café, check messages, send word of our arrival. Cyrille's on his round-the-world trip, Orla's working in television in Sydney, Gaie and Lazer's team had a great conference, and there's mail from Yvonne and my sister.

A taxi to the customs office — four men playing cards, uninterested in being disturbed. Wrong building entirely.

A woman from Bohol finally receives me properly, and I start on the paperwork. Two thousand pesos avoids a boarding officer's visit and covers his "expenses" instead, and after a few stamps, we're cleared.

I get an address for charts. Taxi! The office has relocated without a forwarding address. I duck into a travel agency and make what feels like a hundred phone calls.

No luck — until, nearly giving up, the computer technician pulls out his own notebook and finds it. A frantic taxi ride to beat the lunchtime closure.

We pass the Santo Niño Church — stall after stall of religious effigies, flowers, statues of the Virgin and Christ in various stages of his life.

Guitar shops line the streets too — big business here, rows and rows of classical guitars.

I finally find the obscure building housing the navigation charts — pick up close-ups of the harbor, south of Cebu toward Similion Island, and the Cagayan Islands north of Tubbataha, as a backup in case the permit doesn't come through, which seems likely given how difficult they're making it. A dozen emails already from Bebot detailing his back-and-forth with the authorities.

Walking past a department store, I toss my cigarette butt on the ground — immediately stopped by a "clean city" enforcement officer. Technically a criminal offense, liable for up to six months' imprisonment, meant for serious repeat littering, though I've simply had the bad luck of an overzealous inspector. Taxi! Off to settle the charge — five hundred pesos and it's cleared.

Rush back to the ship. Anchor up, full RPM toward the harbor entrance — ships passing constantly, every type,

fishing boats, tugs, cargo vessels of every size, the water shallow throughout.

It's a maze, and I pilot between docks and vessels carefully — one of the finest natural harbors, but crowded everywhere, many ships resting half-beached in the mud banks, plenty more simply abandoned, left to rot.

Forget the charts here — no time to plot properly, radar distances shifting too fast. Piloting becomes pure instinct and awareness, much like driving here generally — right of way belongs to whoever gets there first, port-to-port more a loose suggestion than a rule, weaving between anchored ships, passenger ferries, inter-island shuttles, pilot boats, wherever space allows.

We find a workable anchorage among four other boats, circling a few times to settle into the right position given the tide's swing.

Some visible impatience from Riversong, or something, and a sarcastic remark from Rich. I wonder, quietly, why.

Anchored properly, a quick strat review of safety measures — two on watch at all times, only two days here for fuel and provisions before heading out, careful coordination for anyone going ashore at night, five people minimum aboard at any time.

Night falls, lights everywhere, a full 360-degree ring around us. We're dropped at Lapu-Lapu City — utter madness, jeepneys jammed everywhere, karaoke bars blasting from every corner, a television and speaker system on every block.

We eat barbecued chicken from a market stall — I haven't eaten all day, and devour it like something starved. A beer, and we wander the busy little town, people everywhere, playing basketball, singing, eating.

Suddenly every light goes out — a power failure, candles now lighting the streets, smoke drifting from jeepney headlights still running.

No internet possible now, so I wander the small streets instead, drawn by singing from a church. Too shy at first to enter, I eventually step in — a full band, and the congregation singing along to lyrics projected on a screen. The church has adopted karaoke.

I can't help smiling — the songs are genuinely good, a special kind of energy in so many people united around one shared belief. It feels almost like a concert. Prayers weave between songs, riding the emotional current — some crying, others visibly moved. I close my eyes, simply happy.

I wander the now-peaceful streets and run into Dave, Ferdi, Karen, and Steve. We share a beer just as power returns, music blasting back to life, neon killing off the candlelit atmosphere. I sing a round of karaoke myself and find an internet connection.

I reach the Shell dock to arrange tomorrow's meeting — too shallow at low tide, only three meters, so we'll either need a lighter to deliver fuel or dock right at high tide.

A quick, humbling basketball game — ten shots, zero baskets — before heading back for pickup. Can't sleep aboard, so I watch a Bond film instead, featuring a French actress I'd had a schoolboy crush on years ago.

November 9, 2000

Up at 5:30 — the light is gorgeous, every ship around us gilded gold. I start shooting photos, take the small boat out to get shots of the Heraclitus herself among the cargo giants — she looks wonderful, oddly out of place but holding her own. More ships arriving already.

An email to Bebot, updating him on our progress and thinking through the Tubbataha situation — happy to set aside the research angle if the permitting proves too difficult, content instead simply to let the crew witness a genuinely wild stretch of reef.

I go on to recap our recent stops — the blasted-but-surprising diving at Cervera Shoal, the brief, complicated visit to Pamilacan, the church and museum in Baclayon, the insight gained talking with fishermen in Lila, no time yet to properly connect with Leon. I mention the typhoon's leftover wind driving us to shelter in Duero, skipping Dumaguete given the persistent westerlies, and the genuine culture shock of arriving in Cebu's busy harbor. I note the marathon diving at Balicasag and Cabilao — no hammerheads since 1996, the only manta we've seen already slaughtered on a beach in Lila — but real hope in the visible success of the sanctuary system, even if it kept us out of the water at Pamilacan; better, honestly, that it did.

I mention staying in touch with Gaie about a possible new addition, John, though we're already fairly full aboard — I'll follow up depending on what opens in Palawan.

On Tubbataha itself, I note I'm no longer inclined to get tangled up in paperwork over it — perhaps something simpler can be arranged out of Puerto Princesa instead, only eighty miles off. I've bought the Cagayancillo chart as a fallback, since no permit's required there.

We're not after samples regardless, just transects and observation.

A shame it couldn't have been simpler. I still carry that evening we spent together fondly — genuinely inspirational.

Now, though, it's back to the practical world of cargo ships, city noise, fuel logistics — my attention mostly on the ship's safety and wellbeing.

Early wake-up again — organizing the diesel delivery. The dock itself is a problem, a huge cargo ship crowding the space, wind pushing us toward it. I hold firm with Shell and request a barge instead. It arrives, larger than our own ship, but the transfer goes smoothly enough, aside from another small diesel spill — we clearly need to revisit our fueling procedure.

By 11:10 we're topped off.

I run a meeting outlining our tasks here, pushing the ship's-work list forward — a few skeptical looks, but there's an expedition still to continue.

Into town by 12:30, to the bank to withdraw funds. At the mall bookstore, I lock eyes with another expat — Mike Ross, twenty years resident here, who knows Bebot and the author of a book on Tubbataha. We talk at lightning speed; he's deeply involved in conservation work and sanctuary creation, running field trips with local schoolchildren.

He invites the ship closer to Mactan, though Rich and Riversong have already headed off; we arrange to meet them in Talisay instead.

I visit Cebu's main fish market — foam boxes packed with ice, though the real catch arrives around 2 or 3 a.m. Rough-looking characters here, tattoos everywhere, eyes that show no fear.

I walk back toward town, chasing good light, photographing along the way — a horse cart ride, jumping off to catch scenes, a jeepney, on and off.

A guitarist plays something melancholy in front of a woman selling bright yellow flowers; I kneel and listen a

while. Christmas decorations already for sale everywhere.

The old buildings show real decay in places, but the city carries its own particular character.

Filipinos might be the most inventive people anywhere when it comes to improvised transport — and the decoration on every jeepney is wonderfully over the top, each one practically a shrine.

I follow the docks for two miles — frenzied activity everywhere, cargo loading nonstop: wood, copra, soda, beer, motorcycles, steel bars, passengers. Security guards, counters, carriers, trucks constantly in and out.

Back to the ship by banca, steering it myself just to get the feel — pull forward to go to port, push back for starboard.

The crew heads to town for a night out; Jesse handles the drop-off, but the engine dies and he's stranded. The captain of a nearby passenger ship sends his own engineer to help, without success, so the small boat gets towed back to the ship instead.

I invite them aboard for a drink, the captain joining too — I give him a tour, and we talk group dynamics. He asks how, as leader, I manage to hold together so many different nationalities.

He warns us about pirates in the harbor — "Been here three years, it's a real problem. Always keep someone on lookout, especially at night."

November 10, 2000

3:30 wake-up, dropped off in the middle of the night. I grab a taxi: "To Pasil, the fishing market."

People are already setting up stalls across the city — no rest for the working poor here. Mattresses with sleeping

children tucked into street corners, small improvised setups with water basins, drawers.

Fresh flowers sit in water, ready for the day's first mass. The world's already fully awake — everyone taking advantage of the cooler hours before the heat sets in, no air conditioning out here on the street.

While big business still sleeps, the street's been alive for hours already, round the clock.

Trucks load and unload fish continuously; most of the fresh tuna's already gone. Catch pours in from every direction — a frantic but oddly organized chaos to the whole place.

I nearly cry at points — piles of baby sharks, ten different species of moray eel, juvenile grouper, juvenile snapper, reef fish, manta rays, eagle rays, whitetip and blacktip sharks, bamboo sharks.

Squid piled like small mountains; in one corner, workers clean cuttlefish, keeping only the white meat.

"How much per kilo?" "Two hundred pesos — comes from north of Cebu."

Every stall has its own overseer, newspaper in hand, calculator and pen ready, presiding from a small throne above the scale.

I shoot two rolls of film — piles of dead sharks, already beginning to rot, a three-meter sailfish, the biggest barracuda I've ever seen, thicker around than my own legs.

Titan triggerfish, baby parrotfish. Huge ice chests get sorted, good catch from bad, each vendor with a specialty. Plenty of shouting; everyone wants their photo taken. A few of the bigger operators eye me warily, likely noticing my focus on sharks, moray, rays — exactly the

species divers care about, and exactly what I'm framing to make a point.

An apocalyptic sea, in pictures.

I walk to the docks, but the crews are already asleep, their day finished.

Anything not poisonous gets taken and sold here.

I drink a coconut while a couple nearby eats breakfast, a fish soup. In one corner, the porters who've carried fish all night decompress with karaoke songs.

I catch a jeepney — traffic already jammed by 6:30, the market impossibly crowded. I find quiet corners with a good vantage point, faces full of character everywhere.

An email arrives — Tubbataha's a go, the man in charge apparently having met Qamar at a coral reef symposium in Bali once. Fifty US dollars entrance fee, though I'll try to negotiate that down.

A message from strat, stateside.

I call Mike Ross and reach Alan White, a significant figure in the local conservation world — I happen to be right across the street from his office as he's heading out. I rush over, grab a copy of his latest paper, and we talk a while. He suggests a study focus on Cagayancillo instead — real need there, unlike Tubbataha, already well documented, though complicated by an actual resident population.

Tubbataha, he agrees, would still be a wonderful diving experience, worth attempting for a few days if weather allows.

Then to the mall for a melodica, twenty dollars, and an attempt to print a document — no store nearby with a decent printer. Back to the ship instead.

Wind's shifted north, so I decide against moving the ship — we're better sheltered here, away from the swells.

I pick up a few videos for the evening's entertainment. Steve handles setup, Dave and Ferdi run the galley as our two "master chefs."

November 11, 2000

Today I rest properly, catch my breath — most of the crew off exploring various corners of the city.

The biggest news: Rich and Riversong will leave the ship as soon as we reach Palawan. I'd had a conversation with Rich earlier, so it isn't a complete surprise — I'd sensed something building for a while.

I think Riversong may be making a mistake here — she's heading to England now, to Rich's family, where he'll work.

Brad's already in England; Gaie's sent a few messages my way too.

I know, underneath it, Rich resented my becoming captain. He apparently wrote to Gaie that he felt better suited to the role, that he'd do a better job than I have.

Ego, always. I never sought the role, let alone the responsibility that comes with it. And yet here I am.

I recognize how organically I've come to handle the ship — charts and pilot books as guidelines and backup, homework done properly, but ultimately relying on instinct to fill in the gaps.

Into town, to the mall, I print some of the digital images successfully — Xtine will be thrilled, finally something concrete to show for the underwater work. I indulge a little, buying four cheap frames, a new ruler, some pens.

I write back to Gaie, Orla, Yvonne, Eibis, Xtine.

November 12, 2000

Another early start — the moon nearly full, sun still below the horizon. Approaching the dock, an overpowering smell of livestock greets us; cages of screaming pigs line the pier as we step off. We catch a taxi to the fish market, bringing the digital camera this time for more images.

The same sadness settles over me, seeing rotten sharks, fins already sliced away.

Everything's for sale here. I talk with the wholesalers, everyone proud, calling out — "Shooting!" — waving cheerfully for the camera.

I hop a horse cart to Carbon Market — disco music blasting from speakers there. A quick coffee, then a bicycle ride back toward the dock, wandering the piers, catching cargo being loaded, especially the pigs, still screaming, a man hosing them down nearby.

I share a Coke with a sailor at a street stall, happily talking politics — he's traveled the world once, though these days he sticks to inter-island routes. "Don't keep your money in your wallet, keep it in your pocket," his bit of wisdom for the day.

Back aboard — organizing charts, mounting a whiteboard and photos on the walls, a proper cleanup in the command room.

Early afternoon, Rich mentions he's thinking of leaving as soon as tomorrow. I'm genuinely caught off guard. Karen, Sam, Heather, and I grab a cab to the most famous, most expensive resort on Mactan Island, hoping to visit an ORCA conservation project — reaching the dive shop, we find only a dive instructor there, formerly of Oman, and we compare notes on the reefs of the Daymaniyat Islands.

He considers the Philippine reefs largely lost at this point — dynamite and cyanide fishing continuing unabated, despite everything.

The moon's full tonight, the anchored ships around us looking almost ghostly.

Sunday-night dinner — speeches touching on the past, on Rich and Riversong's coming departure.

November 13, 2000

Departure day, though Rich and Riversong decide to stay aboard until Palawan after all. Morning meeting, then I race into town to clear us out — the same clerk, another thousand pesos for the paperwork.

A quick dash to the mall with Riversong for one last round of messages — word from Bradley, Xtine, Orla.

I grab a cassette tape — the Bee Gees, craving that particular anthem about staying alive.

I run the fastest, most complete departure meeting yet, and we start raising anchor by 12:45. Cargo ships surround us on every side, a genuine maze to navigate — wind out of the northeast, current in our favor. Fully aware, senses tuned to the ship's every movement, boats crossing in front of us constantly. We hit six knots clearing the harbor.

Sails up, and we're properly sailing by 4:30, cruising at 4.5 knots.

A movie in Nemo's — fast-paced, *Enemy of the State*, keeps me on edge.

Comments and observations: I propose everyone contribute twenty-five dollars each toward the Tubbataha entrance fee, the ship covering whatever remains of the official cost. I hadn't anticipated the reaction — it becomes a real point of contention, people

feeling it should have gone through strat first. I'd only meant to gauge whether we could actually make it happen.

It's genuinely close to my heart — this whole voyage has, in some sense, been building toward this. And how could anyone not want to dive somewhere so pristine, no fishing permitted, visited only four months a year? People puzzle me sometimes.

If someone genuinely has no money, that's one thing — but everyone, without exception, has gone ashore for a day or two here, come back with beer, gotten properly drunk in town.

This money would go toward preserving what might be the last truly untouched reef left in the Philippines.

It becomes, in a way, a question of honor too — of what we actually love about the ocean.

After some quiet time on deck watch, I come back down and simply say: "I'll take responsibility for it. We're going, if the weather allows."

I can't not go. Whatever else gets debated, this is where the heart lands. Time for action over talk.

If I can't negotiate the fee down, I'll find another way — but there won't be further concessions on the money after this.

The conversation shifts to the day we chose not to move the ship — my call at the time — and going forward, no one leaves the ship for an uncertain destination without full agreement first.

Treating people like adults means not needing to hand-hold every decision, but it also means tightening procedure where it's clearly needed. I didn't want it to come to this — but the reactions made it necessary. A

certain wastefulness bred into Western culture, even alongside real talent.

Frustration creeping in — I let it go. The world's still a wonderful, unpredictable place, full of surprising reactions. But it does show something — how rarely the mouth actually speaks from where the heart truly sits.

Where does all the passion go, I wonder. Passion, real desire — so often lost to simple reaction instead.

Engine on now, wind dead. Passing close to Cabilao. By 5:00 we should be back in whale territory.

November 14, 2000

The northeast trade wind settling in properly. The sea's that deep half-cloudy, half-sunny blue.

Collapsed in Nemo's when the engine makes an odd noise — something caught on the prop. Rich and Maik head to the engine room; I get in the water and find just a twig snagged there, clears easily. We're drifting on a one-knot current.

Rich decides to let the engine cool, suspecting the gears.

We pass south of Cebu, along the coast near Dumaguete, on toward the Sulu Sea.

Underway again, close to Apo Island, though we won't make it in time to get everyone diving before dark.

Wind picks up, twenty to twenty-five knots from the northeast, forty degrees off — top speed six knots, the ship happy, all three sails up, headed exactly where we need to go.

Wind still building, barometer dropping steadily.

During lab, plenty of interesting reflections surface — the sense of maneuvering the ship almost like a spacecraft, on some special mission. Obviously we won't

convert all of humanity to any particular way of seeing things — real change happens in small networks, pockets of people connecting with each other.

The Philippines seems to hold both the best and worst of humanity side by side — and somehow, remarkably, people here keep their smiles regardless.

We're heading toward Cagayancillo, roughly eighty to ninety miles from Tubbataha to the south. The wind feels perfect — happy ship, the best sailing in a long while.

Wind suddenly drops and shifts around 7:00 p.m.; I take the helm, jibe, reset our course. The crew watches the Coral Triangle spread before us while I steer under a bright, rising red full moon.

November 15, 2000

We motor a few hours before wind returns. I'm feeling unwell — maybe the medication, maybe just genuine need for rest — so I sleep. That evening a squall hits, gusting to thirty-five knots.

Cagayancillo's off the table now; we steer toward Cavili Island instead.

Dave's birthday, though the celebration doesn't quite catch fire tonight. Rich asks me to stop drumming at 9:00 since Riversong wants to sleep.

I lose myself instead in *The Old Man and the Sea*. Wind and rain wake me later, driving rain making further rest impossible — the Sulu Sea steadily steering us toward Tubbataha regardless.

Wind stays steady; we average 5.5 knots, four or five points off the beam. Cavili's now out of reach too, and we set course directly for Tubbataha. If this wind holds, we may end up heading straight to Puerto Princesa instead.

I pull out the charts — the area looks potentially tricky. Typhoon season's winding down, though, and the charts suggest little real risk even in northern Palawan.

New options opening up. Reading up on Coron as a possibility too.

November 16, 2000

Swells building, wind holding from five points off, the ship making six knots. Tubbataha's calling us onward. I spend most of the day horizontal, a stiff neck and a strange taste lingering in my mouth.

Still, we're sailing well with today's wind. Dreams stay vivid.

I catch fragments of tension in different tones of voice around the ship — small conversations here and there, a little nagging under the surface.

Ship's meeting focused on the science — everyone presenting a coral species, talk of conservation issues generally.

November 17, 2000

The weather's toyed with us all night, and Tubbataha's now firmly out of reach — the swells and wind there would have made conditions genuinely miserable. On top of it, our fishing line's caught in the prop again.

After lunch I go in, high seas rolling, the ship rocking hard, current working against me too. I hold onto the rudder, riding it up and down, knife in hand, feeling absurdly cinematic about the whole thing. I cut the line free, saving our good lure in the process. Mission accomplished.

My brain still feels fried from whatever bug's going around — Karen's running a fever in her bunk, Sam not entirely herself either.

November 18, 2000

A serious squall overnight shakes us badly — the ship heeling hard, thirty to forty knots of wind, rain hitting like a wall. We're fifty miles from Puerto Princesa now.

Sailing with wind two points forward of the beam, steady the whole way. By night the clouds finally clear, stars reappearing.

Nemo's turns into a movie lounge for most of the day.

Rich and Riversong will leave as soon as we reach Puerto Princesa.

November 19, 2000

We sail past the harbor entrance and let ourselves drift into position overnight. At first light, sails down, we approach Puerto Princesa properly. Wind drops, sky clears, and Rich pilots us in.

Our first anchor drags; the second holds.

Sunday — little chance of clearing customs today, communication being what it is. The town itself is remarkably clean, trash bins every fifty meters, transport almost entirely by tricycle taxi, four pesos a ride.

A quick look at the fishing market — huge yellowfin tuna alongside the usual reef fish.

Once the first group's ashore, I take the small boat to visit the stilt villages nearby. Many families live entirely aboard their bancas, fully self-sufficient — cooking over wood fires, laundry strung from the rigging. Kids paddle

small canoes between houses. Several boats sit up on drying platforms, their own version of dry dock, getting fresh paint or structural repairs.

One man tells me he was hit by the same storm we weathered days ago.

I find myself wondering how many boats, how many families, simply vanish at sea here, unrecorded.

These are people living entirely outside the usual framework of national law — answering only to the sea itself.

I shoot a roll of film.

Sunday dinner turns emotional — Rich and Riversong's last night with us.

They've been packing for days, working through what feels like every possession Rich owns — a small gift left for him before he goes, in a sense, from the rest of us. So many bags. He takes nearly everything he's ever owned aboard, down to a paddle from our very first canoe, picked up back in Kendari. I hadn't realized quite how sentimental he was about objects. Even Riversong looks a little surprised.

His farewell speech is genuinely touching, and he cries. He's given so much to this ship — his connection to it clearly real, a labor of love in its own right.

November 20, 2000

As I prepare to visit customs, a banca arrives carrying the officials themselves. We receive them in Nemo's with cold water; clearance takes all of ten minutes.

Rich and Riversong depart, waving from shore. I meet them later for lunch.

I accompany the customs officer to immigration, paperwork ready for the visa extensions — photocopies, the usual.

The bank can't process anything; the lines are down.

A brief ten minutes at the local museum — exhibits on the various ethnic groups of Palawan, a fragment of scrolls recovered from the Tabon Caves, dating to the Neolithic.

A quick lunch with Rich and Riversong, and I hand them some money before they go.

November 21, 2000

Nearly the whole day spent running errands in town — the bank, then visa extensions, a short stop at the WWF office, and inquiries at local dive shops about Honda Bay.

News from Orla.

November 22, 2000

A day devoted to getting the ship ready to sail. The weather turns wild — rainstorm, wind, and the loudest, closest lightning I've seen in a long time. We collect rainwater, refilling our drinking supply. Morning ship's-work meeting emphasizes water — every container had run empty, and the rain gives us exactly what we need. A good reminder of priorities: without water, nothing else matters, and there's no point chasing anything grander if the basics aren't secured.

Wind hits hard, but I need it after last night — I take up a brush and scrub and scrub.

Afternoon, a quick trip to the museum and to check email, picking up a book on the Tabon Cave and Palawan's cultural minorities.

I answer messages, then wander the market, studying the fish again, buying woven mats and baskets for the ship — beautiful work.

November 23, 2000

Early rise for everyone. We raise the beagle, departure meeting over breakfast.

I hand the anchor-raising and harbor exit over to Ferdi. Since 6 a.m. I've been busy clipping chart holders, rewriting emergency procedures, watch duties, and radio protocols, all laminated in plastic — getting a little obsessive about organizing the ship, making it feel more livable.

Last night's rain has silted up the whole harbor, but the sky's kind today, clear overhead. Ferdi's fully in control, though as soon as we clear the harbor, swells hit us — uncomfortable, if not dangerous.

I get properly absorbed in the rigging locker, pulling everything apart, organizing ropes, heaving lines, lead line, setting them out to dry. Running the length of the ship, whipping every rope's end.

We reach Fondeado Island by 4:00. I take over piloting, anchoring four cables off the reef — visibility's poor, but into the wind, sheltered from swells if not from the wind itself, we drop anchor in ninety feet of water. A reverse boost, and the anchor holds.

Sam and I dive the anchor — nothing visible down there, following the chain by feel alone, finding it buried in soft mud. With the steady northeasterly, even a slight drag should keep us safe. Easier sleep that way.

I play in the mud a while, genuinely happy to be back underwater.

A productive day — Jesse absorbed in painting and finishing the men's-quarters head, Maik busy

everywhere, Sam working navigation with Heather, Dave on the boat repair box.

Our small boat's fixed and holding — we lower it right away.

Steve and I take a ride to the island, checking for any village out of courtesy. Instead we find fifteen boats anchored off the reef, seafaring families living aboard their small bancas, sheltering here overnight from the wind.

Laundry hangs from every set of rigging, taking advantage of a rare sunny day.

We approach, get a few photos, and sit a while, quietly reflecting on their lives — they understand the sea better than almost anyone, a whole floating village, entire families living in spaces no larger than our own Synesthesia.

We try to talk, but no one speaks English.

Comments and observations tonight turns into wild singing, then some frustration with Karen — after nine months aboard, three days a week supposedly devoted to her thesis, she's only now arrived at the basic methodology, something that should have been settled eight months ago. And now she wants Philippine data added on top of it.

No matter, though — I'm in a strange, restless mood, needing to break out of my own shell a little. We haven't done real theater in a while.

After dinner I work on finances, trying to stay ahead of them, and on this log. I channeled some of today's energy into simply running around getting things done — better than letting frustration fester, especially with the science likely to dominate again soon.

November 24, 2000

Sam and a few others head out early scouting a possible science site. Weather's perfect, an unusual wind from the west again.

They return with disappointing news — recent rain and river runoff have silted the water badly, visibility poor.

After lab, we head to the Dos Palmas resort for information — I'd had a contact through Bebot, but he's since resigned. Instead we talk with their dive master. Most of the local reefs are in rough shape, though he's reluctant to say so outright. What we see around the island confirms it — apart from a few porites heads and some struggling staghorn, not much down there.

So the plan becomes scouting nine miles out, trying our luck elsewhere.

Karen's wearing on my patience — bossy, directing the science with an authority she hasn't quite earned yet. Now she wants to analyze five years of past data, despite not having finished the methodology for even a single transect. She spends the whole morning instead absorbed in a paper about shell sizing. Taking real liberties here.

I meet with her and Sam, particularly about data-sharing arrangements should we end up collecting anything at Tubbataha — the agreement there being to share findings with park management.

A dive with Ferdi, Maik, and Steve — the reef here badly cyanide-damaged, much of the coral dead and overtaken by algae. But no dive's ever entirely without surprise, and we find a huge jawfish peering from its burrow. A mellow dive overall, drifting between sand patches and reef; visibility's too poor for filming, so we simply watch — butterflyfish grazing coral polyps, clownfish tucked in anemones, gobies scattered across the sand flats.

Around the ship, a school of tuna feeds on sardines, splashing everywhere.

Rain comes down, a rainbow as reward. The ship stays busy with maintenance work — wood everywhere. A productive day overall.

Chapter Eight

Philippines, Fondeado Island

November 24, 2000

Does it always come down to a kind of war?

How else do you preserve something except by fending off whoever's exploiting it? Reefs won't survive without real protection — an army of dedicated people keeping the harm at bay.

Endless dualities. A defending force, protecting a given territory. The same old game of boundaries. Utopian in theory, all of us human on the same planet — but are we really the same, underneath it all?

Who's really the enemy here but ourselves? Without real consciousness of our own actions, there's not much hope.

A fisherman setting off a dynamite blast is fully aware of what he's doing. Obviously, each time, there's less fish the next time around. Simple enough logic, and the answer, in the end, is just as simple.

But that fisherman has a family to feed, and the ocean is his only real resource. With industrialization came the giant machinery, greater efficiency, but also monopolies held by a handful of large operations — small fishermen simply can't compete. The pace keeps accelerating, everything faster: production, movement, consumption, waste. All of it feeding some larger machine that only knows how to demand more. Built entirely on growth. Can it even be slowed, let alone redirected?

Like a river, ideally, irrigating good ground and steering clear of anything already choked with weeds. Networks forming, spreading in every direction.

In the case of the sea, her generosity gets taken advantage of.

Ironically, the cultures that seem to revere fish the most are often the same ones driving certain species toward extinction. Bluefin tuna is the classic case — eaten raw in Japan, prized for nutrition and flavor both.

Prices are set by scarcity — something that commands a premium is either rare or difficult to catch, and prices climb accordingly, right up until there's simply nothing left. And if you're living inside today's economy, how do you turn down a catch that could feed your family for months?

The same story plays out in Pamilacan with whale sharks — a single catch sets a family up for half a year.

So what can actually be done, realistically? Action, I think — living according to your own ethics, your values, your dreams.

November 25, 2000

5:30, a small dedicated crew up to move the ship, heading for Fraser Island. Wind out of the north, overcast skies calling for real vigilance, since the bay's scattered with submerged reef.

I go down into the chain locker myself, mostly just to make the point — no big deal, though there's the usual joking about who draws that particular duty. The new light rigged down there is a real improvement, safer too. The anchor comes up clean and easy.

Time again to work through the route. The ship's well underway on the maintenance front, and there's plenty of enthusiasm behind the science side too.

Maik takes charge of the operation, raising anchor and piloting us to the next anchorage.

We settle in a bay ringed by mangroves and fish traps, a sandy island to the east, Palawan's mountains rising majestically behind it all.

Still overcast, though the weather's slowly clearing, the sea flat calm. The water runs green, tinted by mangrove leaves.

Fishermen work nearby, though most head for deeper water to try their luck.

On the way in, two older bottlenose dolphins surface close to the ship, their fins marked and scarred with age.

Near the anchorage, a single dolphin surfaces once more.

10 a.m., the anchor holds. Sam puts together a team to scout ahead.

Around lunchtime I take the small boat out to a mangrove flat alone, wanting the scene to stay quiet. Small crabs duck into their burrows; the tangled roots host oysters, insects, and delicate little wading birds at their feet. I stay still, and eventually go unnoticed.

Cruising further, fish traps everywhere. I slip into the water beside the boat — the reef here silted over, thick with algae, though the simple pleasure of gliding through it remains. Sea snakes dive as I pass; countless small fish scatter in perfect unison, bodies glittering across the sand like something psychedelic.

Back aboard, I pull out charts and pilot books, studying the region, letting the patterns settle in — winds, currents, where we might head come August.

I cook dinner for everyone, pasta with a blue cheese sauce, and we watch **Life Is Beautiful**.

November 26, 2000

Wake at dawn, setting off as the sun climbs slowly behind the clouds. The sea's dead flat, no wind at all.

Again I choose a sandbar to paddle toward. The engine keeps cutting out, so I abandon my plan of heading up a nearby river — the mangroves become my meditation spot instead.

I sleep through most of the morning, and we head to Starfish Island for an easy Sunday afternoon.

In the shallows, wrasse and starfish everywhere, a jawfish peeking from its hole.

The light's gorgeous, limestone cliffs standing out in the distance. Rain clouds pass us by, and we leave our footprints across the sandbar.

November 27, 2000

Strat command in the morning to clear our schedule, set objectives, and take stock of the general mood.

A full crew meeting to set the pace for the coming days, and then I hand Sam the job of bringing the ship into Puerto Princesa.

Small tuna leap around us, hunting bait fish. I cast a line without success. Still trying.

Wind starts up this morning, from the west — strange. What's going on? The world's climate patterns are clearly off, we all know that, but the real question is how much.

I sometimes feel like a reluctant apocalyptic prophet — what I see doesn't exactly bring joy. Still, I take in every gift nature offers regardless. Like a beautiful painting where someone's now dragging broad, careless

brushstrokes across it, colors that simply don't belong together anymore.

Email in town brings word that Gaie and Lazer will arrive December 14th.

News from Orla, Kiko, Kelly. I visit the WWF office, learning Dindo's still away.

At the Swiss store I spend forty dollars on treats, mostly food, and a bottle of poire williams for the ever-expanding captain's locker.

That evening I stay on guard, watching *Face/Off* — fast-paced, all about identity and role. Sends a chill down my spine.

I notice my own mind shifting lately, installing new patterns, trimming away some older ones.

November 28, 2000

Email in town again — I'm becoming a genuine addict at this point. A quick stop at WWF; Dindo, our contact, is off at a workshop out of town.

I work on the route for 2001 and 2002 — always seeming to stall somewhere past the Solomons.

I also cook, working with cuttlefish today.

That evening, more work on the website, trimming and adding content.

November 29, 2000

7:30, at the dock — a crowd waiting for the passenger boat. "Mr. Michel!"

I climb into the van; we make the rounds of hotels picking up passengers — two Japanese with an adorable

daughter, a German-Filipino couple, and two others, genders reversed from what I'd expected.

We're headed for the Underground River.

A checkpoint for forest products; we pass through with nothing to declare.

But the signs of extraction are everywhere. Bulldozers cutting a new road, men operating them. Who's really controlling whom here?

Man neither will nor really can stop the machine he's unleashed — he simply operates it now.

Most natural wonders here have become businesses competing against other businesses — no more free access to nature's marvels, it seems. What's happened to that?

We pass through rice paddies and coconut groves, tucked between limestone cliffs and jungle-covered mountains.

A two-and-a-half-hour drive through wonderfully scenic country. Water buffalo carry children on their backs; chickens, dogs, and monitor lizards saunter unhurried across the road no matter how insistently the driver leans on his horn.

We arrive in Sabang, a nice little town already well accustomed to tourism — the T-shirt shops and carving stalls make that clear enough.

Easy to spot which banca we'll board — all fitted with life jackets, a park regulation. We're entering a national park, listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site for the past two years.

The swells run high, and we get a bit wet crossing over.

We land on a white sand beach and follow the monkey trail. Whole families of macaques watch us pass, clearly

assessing who might be distracted enough to steal something from.

Huge monitor lizards flick their tongues, tasting the air, sizing up lunch, I imagine.

The entrance to the Underground River opens into a turquoise lagoon. On the sandy slope, gobies — half fish, half something else entirely — step right out of the water onto the sand, though they remain fish enough to dive back in the moment we get close.

The first step in some parallel evolution, maybe.

Swallows dart in and out of a fissure in the cliff face marking the river's entrance.

I take charge of the light, seated at the bow of our canoe. The river runs eight and a half kilometers beneath the cliffs.

We enter enormous chambers, natural cathedrals — stalactites and stalagmites everywhere, natural frescoes on the ceiling, and the bats, whose smell reaches us well before the entrance does. They hang from the rock, upside down, taking flight if the light lingers too long — hundreds of them, everywhere.

Our boat driver keeps pointing out formations resembling birds, strips of bacon, mushrooms — I wish, honestly, he'd just let the scene speak for itself.

The caves are genuinely magical, a natural wonder that earns every superlative.

Lunch is served, which also serves as a wake-up call for the watching monkeys, alert for any opportunity. A girl with a wooden stick keeps them at bay, but one split second of inattention costs us a whole bunch of bananas.

I can't help drawing the comparison to our own species. We're not really so far removed from the same instincts — always watching for an opening, an entire economy

built on exactly that impulse, and people always find the cracks.

In Sabang, sipping a beer, my eyes catch a bumper sticker: "I love the ocean."

Palawan's dotted with environmental signage everywhere — keep the city clean, avoid fines, don't litter, protect our rivers and streams, our future depends on it, Philippine fisheries are in decline, there's no time left to waste.

November 30, 2000

The market's buzzing this morning, the produce genuinely fresh. Dave and I hunt down cauliflower, cucumbers, greens, threading the maze of stalls, meeting up again in the next aisle. Soybean sprouts, Dave charming the vendor girls along the way. In the meat section, a beef brain on offer.

Fish pouring in from every direction — we buy three rabbitfish, huge shrimp, a cuttlefish. Giant mackerel and tuna everywhere.

Green mussels, seaweed, shells, everything imaginable.

An old woman lets us try her homemade peanut butter.

Ten minutes for email before heading back.

On the dock, Susie and Ferdi arriving.

Back aboard, the Navtex brings unwelcome news — a tropical storm, Rumbia, four hundred miles out, moving at fifteen knots.

We spring into action, the whole crew at their stations within two minutes.

Better to hurry now and use whatever time we have to get properly secured. We arrive around 4:00 and anchor two hundred meters from the study site.

The beagle goes down; I cook dinner — rabbitfish, a soybean sprout salad, cauliflower soup.

December 1, 2000

A dialogue with the sea.

Tell me — what have we done to you lately? You, at least, can't lie, though man has spun quite a web of it anyway — a giant grid of information built to confuse, to disorient, to trap.

The mindset of conspiracy — but what's conspiracy, really, but a game of power and control?

But you, the sea, flowing through our own blood, breathing life into everything?

Attention on the body's own quiet signals — the intimate connection between muscle and mind, eyes, facial tension, all of it offering a clue to some underlying state.

Anchored off Starfish Island, wind from the north, sky overcast but dry. The sea, silver, runs murky — construction on the mainland for a new road partly to blame, rain washing sediment into the bay, no doubt slowly smothering a few coral heads in the process.

Still, the bay carries a genuinely wild feeling. That sense of being properly out there.

December 2, 2000

I get seized by a sudden urge to work with my hands. The command room gets a full overhaul — a few days' project, dedicated purely to making it better.

Tools out, dust everywhere — a small war against sloppiness, trying to clean out habits that took root back in dry dock and just kept going since.

I'm feeling unwell too, so rather than let the frustration of missing a few days of diving build, I stay busy with my hands instead of my head.

December 3, 2000

Continuing the command room overhaul — everything pulled out, sanding down the chart table, the walls.

That evening I crash entirely — a serious flu hits, sweating through the sheets, barely functional, edging toward hallucination. Vivid, feverish dreams, glued to my bunk for two days, sleeping nearly thirty hours straight to let my body fight it off. In between, I manage a few pages of Talbot Mundy's **Om** — a great book.

December 6, 2000

My first mandarinfish, underwater — genuinely exciting. He appears mid-transect, peeking from a hole; I check on him again once filming's done, but he's vanished, then reappears later. I have to watch my ascent rate carefully — my ears playing tricks on me a little.

December 8, 2000

Trying to catch up on everything. My sinuses are still a mess. I write out a work list, a new crew roster, package up finances for Xtine, and jump on the small boat to film our fourth transect. Stuffed myself with decongestant, just in case.

Between transect lines I dive down into the sand flats, playing with mantis shrimp, finding a few anemones, elegant whip coral. A huge grouper appears.

December 9, 2000

Pushing to finish the last two transects. As usual now, the team heads out ahead of me and I follow later to film — works beautifully, especially since my time underwater is somewhat limited by the decongestant's effects.

I lose my temper a little during comments and observations — the noise level has become genuinely unbearable.

December 12, 2000

Early rise at dawn. The full moon setting as we raise the small boat and the anchor.

We reach Puerto Princesa around noon, though anchoring proves troublesome — the engine won't start, and the chain kinks in its pipe.

We finally manage it, and I race into town for the bank and the WWF office, hoping to secure the Tubbataha permit. I'll meet with the board around 8 tomorrow morning.

An accident-review sequence on the anchor system, working through the underlying triggers.

December 14, 2000

Ferdi and I pick up Gaie and Lazer from the airport, loaded down with luggage as ever, both looking well. We race back through town by tricycle, catching up on news from friends around the world, and the latest state of things aboard.

We stay busy readying the ship for our Tubbataha visit — food coming in, the last of the woodworking projects wrapping up.

I give my first proper ship's tour. She looks trimmed and clean — though we haven't gone out of our way to hide any dirt or cracks, since an honest, objective view will matter for the upcoming dry dock.

I'm happy, two of my closest friends aboard again. I mention my concern that the overall spirit's felt a little thin lately, and the need to inject some real quality back into it.

December 16, 2000

Yes — I've paid the park entrance fee. The rangers have been notified of our visit, and it's all clear for tomorrow.

The president of the Philippines happens to be in Puerto Princesa on an official visit, and the government office handling permits is unavailable as a result.

Their systems clearly aren't fully built out yet — like any organization, still working through the friction of new policies and forms.

Plenty of people seem involved in the decision-making, mostly on the thinking side of things — the actual execution remains the real challenge.

We hold a dinner aboard, gathering the crew back together before departure.

Karen finds a thousand things to finish before leaving — transferring every video tape, checking off her lists with the obsessive precision I've come to expect from her.

December 17, 2000

Finally underway for Tubbataha Reef. For a while it felt like an impossible goal — endless meetings, permit visits, fees to pay — but we raised anchor around 10:00.

We said goodbye to Karen, who's left the ship.

Ferdi pilots us out of the harbor; a mile off we raise the mainsail. Wind's nearly dead east, forcing us to motor — slow going, four knots at best.

A clear night lets us sleep on deck, watched over by the stars.

December 18, 2000

Wind fickle against us all night. We reach the edge of Tubbataha Reef around 2:00 p.m.

The rangers come out to meet us; Lazer and I board their boat with dive gear, rope, shackles — racing the setting sun.

Lazer and I set the mooring, a massive concrete block. We rig a heavy line and bring the ship in cautiously — a tricky approach, current running southeast, little margin for error, needing to line up almost exactly on the buoy.

By 4:30 we're safely moored to the reef. I head over to the station to introduce ourselves.

Built on a sandbar, the station houses eight rangers — two navy personnel, two from a coast guard unit, two park-funded rangers, two from the World Wildlife Fund.

Power comes from a diesel generator; the original solar setup failed some time ago. Rainwater's their only fresh water source.

Last week they caught a Taiwanese fishing boat operating illegally in the protected area — crew now in jail in Puerto Princesa, boat confiscated. Its steering had failed too, one man literally holding the outboard's body to keep it pointed.

The channel to the station is too shallow for our small boat, so I tow it in like a camel driver leading his herd. Three turtles startle as we pass. The water, crystal clear, is a real pleasure just to look at and feel.

Rangers rotate out monthly, weather permitting.

It's clear enforcing park rules here is genuinely difficult, given the limited infrastructure — maybe even impossible at times.

The steady northeast wind rules out visiting sites on the reef's northern side for now.

The mooring block seems large enough for our size, though it hasn't really been tested in truly rough conditions yet.

December 19, 2000

A day filled with dives, one after another. We enter straight off the ship, following the mooring line down to about seventy feet. The compressor runs constantly, divers in and out all day, someone always tending topside with the small boat ready.

Wind keeps blowing from the northeast; the ship rocks, but we're secure.

Everyone spots sharks, jacks, on their dives.

Among the rubble, I find a strange leaf-shaped yellow fish that Lazer later dubs the "lettuce fish."

Morays too, though sadly the reef top itself is badly damaged — dynamite, cyanide — and despite a decade of dedicated protection, it still hasn't recovered here. Most of the dead coral's been overtaken by algae or invertebrate growth.

A fantastic dive regardless. Across our earlier exploration of the Bohol Sea and Honda Bay, we hadn't seen a single shark. Here at Tubbataha, sharks appear on nearly every dive.

Gaie and I dive the east side of the ship — a wall dropping into real depth, sharks again, school after

school of huge jacks cruising past, snapper, sweetlips, fusiliers, unicornfish, surgeonfish all patrolling. A few tuna hunting along the reef's shallow edge. But once more, the coral itself tells a grim story — heavily blasted in the past, when we'd hoped to find something truly untouched. Clear evidence that a damaged reef, left alone, does recover — slowly. Fish populations rebound within a few years, but coral takes decades. Once blasted and colonized by algae, that patch of reef essentially becomes a desert.

December 20, 2000

We open the day with a great acting class led by Lazer — working through different energetic states, from sensitive to conscious movement. Three exercises: Transform, where a called-out word triggers an instant physical transformation; emotional sound work; and Kronorama, tracing a single life arc from birth through childhood, adulthood, old age, and death.

A dive to Amos Rock. Ferdi and I drop onto a wall thick with sea fans, greeted by a huge school of unicornfish, a blacktip cruising the shallows. We continue down a sloping plateau, and at a hundred and forty-five feet, a silvertip shark passes right in front of us — apparently the first sighting of the species here in years. Either luck, or Tubbataha's genuinely drawing back its top predators.

Rain-like clouds of fusiliers and caesio, lone jacks cruising the reef top, groupers present throughout.

Over two pinnacles, we swim through a school of spadefish, the reef top thick with clouds of anthias in the staghorn.

Fish life here is rich — two huge boxfish, pufferfish, most of the common reef species represented.

We spot a whitetip and a nurse shark, more surgeonfish schools. The coral's healthy in places, though clear signs of past bleaching linger too.

The shallows form a maze of mini coral canyons over sand — blennies, gobies, lizardfish tucked throughout, clams everywhere, the reef top mostly staghorn colonies, hawkfish, small groupers.

Strat command in the afternoon, working through the Cambodia schedule and talking through group dynamics — clearly some real attention needed on lifestyle standards aboard. Lazer and I transfer images between our cameras.

Ferdi and I go through the charts together — his seamanship keeps improving, real drive to learn there.

Another dive follows. Sam returns from hers having spotted a manta ray, turtles, sharks — though her report on the coral itself remains sobering.

The light turns sensual, golden rays coating everything in something like magic. We spot a whitetip, reef fish everywhere, and follow two huge Napoleon wrasse for most of the dive.

On the sandbank, garden eels feed, swaying with the current.

I cook dinner with Gaie, a glass or two of wine, and though I'd promised a night dive, my body simply refuses — we watch *Face/Off* instead.

Sam gets upset with me over it, and I snap back — we reconcile quickly. I just won't dive if my body's clearly telling me not to.

December 21, 2000

First dive of the morning, west side — the reef top dead, though the wall itself draws real life. Sweetlips, snapper, groupers, rainbow runners, a few jacks patrolling.

We spot a huge blacktip.

Strat command on communication systems and computers.

A dive on the southeast tip of North Tubbataha — a gradual descent down a sandy slope studded with bommies, garden eels feeding, the sand leveling into a plateau at ninety feet. Schools of unicornfish, snappers, huge grouper, sharks constantly cruising the wall, thick with purple sea fans and whip coral. A turtle rests nearby.

The wall keeps descending, well past any depth we'll ever reach.

On the sand flat, resting whitetips — we count six of them. Stingrays tucked under ledges.

A surreal landscape — proper aquanauts today. Most reef fish species present; we've found huge boxfish scattered throughout Tubbataha. Two entirely unafraid turtles let us approach within a foot.

Wind's picked up, dead north — the pattern's been clear since this morning. The northeast monsoon has firmly established itself.

I'd expected Tubbataha to be the most pristine reef we'd encounter, but the honest truth is that truly pristine reef simply doesn't exist anymore, not in this part of the world at least. Tubbataha's no exception. Most reef tops here have been blasted at some point — some recovering, others clearly too far gone, destined to remain rubble deserts.

I find myself picturing Bebot ten years back, a handful of people camping on these sandbars for months at a stretch, chasing off illegal fishermen. Now Tubbataha has real protection.

The dedication of a few individuals paying off, genuinely — real conservation work.

Dinner conversation turns to our shipboard culture and lifestyle. Having outside voices come through offers a real opportunity to reach the crew — I've said most of this myself, at various points, but as Gaie points out, people tend to hear what they're already inclined to hear, and I suspect I'm simply too close to everyone by now.

Discussion circles a lot around lab sessions. I realize I probably front-load too much information at once generally, and that my own enthusiasm can come across almost as preaching, when really my goal is the opposite — demystifying, not mystifying further.

December 22, 2000

Dive, dive, dive. The small boat comes and goes constantly. The reef tops remain fairly sad, though the fish action stays strong throughout.

A squally night, strong wind out of the north — everyone woken at some point, Gaie included. I sleep in the command room. The mooring holds.

December 23, 2000

Early-morning dive, the best light on the reef. Fish waking up too — a curious school of batfish comes to investigate. On the sand, garden eels busy feeding.

Overcast weather pushes back our filming plans for "the case" — our small photo-story piece for Pelican, in exchange for the cases they've donated. The sky clears

eventually, and the "pirates" assemble on the bow. Lazer, playing a Bond-style character, makes his entrance, escaping their attack by leaping overboard.

We shoot an underwater scene too, Rebecca and Gaie assisting Lazer through it.

That evening, a millennium-themed party with the rangers aboard — food prepared, music pumping, everyone dancing.

Meanwhile the barbecue nearly topples over.

Dance magic.

December 24, 2000

Tubbataha truly reveals itself today. The rangers take us to Bird Islet.

We follow the reef's edge for twelve miles — kind weather today, the calmest seas since we arrived.

Reaching the shallows, boobies immediately investigate the strangers entering their territory.

We land, boobies flying everywhere, egrets feeding in the shallows.

In the rookery, I sit inches from nesting boobies — a pair constantly rearranging their nest, a single mother staring back at me, eye to eye, each sitting on a single egg.

We dive a nearby wall; three reef sharks patrol as soon as we drop in, curious, approaching close. But the real highlight is the turtles — everywhere. My whole body twists in every direction, unsure where to focus first. From the reef crest they seem to launch themselves into open water; at one point, within a single field of view, I count twenty-four of them.

Sharks everywhere too. Two huge tuna cruise past, rainbow runners alongside — but the turtle parade never lets up. I nearly forget about the reef itself, still in rough shape beneath it all.

Fifty meters along the wall, I'm essentially flying, turtles on every side, schools of black snapper, big-eye trevally, jacks, groupers, emperor fish. The show simply doesn't stop.

Caves and crevasses line the wall, and it seems a turtle pops from nearly every crack — huge hawksbills, every size represented, and more sharks still, blacktip, whitetip, nurse, constantly patrolling.

I suck my tank completely dry and stay in the water anyway, unwilling to leave, free-diving among the turtles until I lose track of the schools of unicornfish, surgeonfish, fusiliers raining down all around. A total, overwhelming experience — simply high again on it all.

I remember Bebot's words now: Tubbataha is like going to Africa — raw nature, underwater.

That evening, Maik and Ferdi cook Christmas Eve dinner, sauerkraut and ham. Everyone offers a toast; wine flows freely. A genuinely happy family tonight.

After dinner, most of the crew gets picked up by the rangers, heading over for their own party at the station.

December 25, 2000

Before anyone else is up, Jesse, Ferdi, and I dive straight off the ship — magical light, shooting straight down onto the sand, schools of batfish, fusiliers.

Gaie, Lazer, Rebecca, and I film our final scene for the case — Lazer's "Bond" character swimming ashore to meet his two companions, opening the Pelican case, pouring out a shot of tequila.

Gaie, Lazer, and I cook Christmas brunch together — shrimp, lamb fillet in rosemary sauce, stuffed chicken, risotto. The first Christmas in a while I haven't put together a full six-course spread on Christmas Eve itself.

The King of Hearts — everyone stretched out on deck with mattresses and pillows, closing out our holiday movie marathon. A story about a group escaping an asylum during the First World War, into an abandoned town — one of the finest films I know.

December 26, 2000

Up at dawn, sky gray, wind picking up. Tide's unusually low, exposing all the reef flats.

Lazer dives to free the mooring lines, and we head off the reef, wind from the north against us the whole way — motoring.

Waves slap the bow; we raise sail and motor the rest of the way to Puerto Princesa.

December 27, 2000

We reach the harbor by 11:00, and it hits me — how far we'd really traveled, not in distance but in mindset. The city reasserts her grip on our attention almost immediately, hungry for it — email, food, video.

December 31, 2000

Tonight the new millennium officially begins, and my own reading of it isn't exactly joyful — more a sense of some huge transition underway in humanity's own evolution.

Two thousand years in, technology's advanced tremendously, but something in man himself may have

regressed. The biggest loss, perhaps, in values and quality.

A celebration, in a sense, for Kronos, the god of time, twisted through centuries of Christian tradition into this particular millennial marker. Still, it gives our collective, somewhat lost species something to hold onto.

So fireworks tonight, in good old tradition, marking the death of one cycle and the birth of another — this time on the scale of centuries. A hundred times three hundred and sixty-five days, some thirty-six thousand five hundred sunrises and sunsets.

January 1, 2001

A year ago, in Bali, we were cleaning up after a wild party. This time, the opposite — in Bali, nothing on earth could have kept someone from being aboard for the midnight bell. This year, everyone left the ship except the minimum guard of four — Jesse, Ferdi, Susie, and me.

I visit Bangwa that evening.

January 3, 2001

A mad scramble in town organizing diesel and oil. We dock around 2:30, timing it against the rising tide as wind starts to build.

The ship handles well, and we ease slowly into position — takes a few tries to land the heaving lines properly, a bit embarrassing, but she's safe.

We wait, and wait, and the diesel finally arrives around 6:00, delivered, for some reason, in two separate trips — by the time the second one's done, it's fully dark, nearly 8:00.

But the tide's dropping, and the dock would grow unsafe for us, especially if the wind shifts.

So we undock at 8:00, back to anchor. Meanwhile I get a little frustrated fielding questions about the night out people are missing — not exactly a seamanlike concern under the circumstances.

A first for us — undocking and anchoring after dark. Really only a psychological hurdle in the end, nothing especially difficult about it.

January 4, 2001

Heart pounding — Orla should be arriving in Puerto Princesa about now.

I wait at the airport with a bouquet, half nervous, half thrilled, never quite sure how a reunion like this will actually feel until it happens. You can manage the outside easily enough; what happens inside is another matter entirely.

And there she is, radiant. We barely talk the whole ride back to the ship. Only that afternoon do I finally start telling her the full story of our voyage since.

January 5, 2001

We get the ship ready. A mad scramble in town — immigration informing me I'll need to return to Puerto Princesa separately just to clear us out.

Chapter Nine

Voyage from Puerto Princesa to Coron, Palawan

January 6, 2001

Wake up wrapped in an army blanket and Orla's arms. The sun's just peeking out, the eyes taking in the day's first light. The mountain range ringing Puerto Princesa Bay reminds us how lucky we are — clouds tinted rose greet us, a few stars still holding their light a little longer.

The gong rings, and the crew slowly surfaces from the realm of dreams, one by one, still carrying the residue of last night's party. We'd celebrated friendship and nature, Louis Armstrong playing softly in the background.

A feast from the sea — seaweed, mussels, pasta.

Heather cooks today, up before everyone else with a hearty breakfast.

Last messages sent from town, a goodbye to the local officials, two roast chickens from the street stalls for lunch, eyes taking in the city one last time. The little Vietnamese noodle shop where I ate so often — pork soup special, plain bread. The young girl always smiling, and a quiet complicity with the owner over our shared vices, coffee and cigarettes. No coffee on the menu, but we always had one afterward regardless. We never exchanged a word, but the eyes never lied.

From the shop next door, a newspaper to catch up on the news — the bribery scandal around the Philippine president, fighting in Mindanao, upcoming films.

I always left the newspaper behind on the table.

The pier's crowded with fishing bancas, bright-painted outriggers, sailfish tails nailed to the masts, whole families cooking over wood stoves — Bajau people, the seafaring tribe, traveling in convoy. Part of their community lives at the edge of town in stilt houses, busy with laundry, water, mending nets.

Ten of us aboard now. Brenda's flown home, Jesse and Dave are traveling overland to meet us in Coron. The ship feels spacious, clean — Orla's touch evident throughout. Nemo's is a proper library again, the books clearly loved.

Ferdi pilots us out, and we're back under the spell of open water and Neptune.

For a few seconds, a pod of dolphin fins breaks the surface, then vanishes for good.

Wind from the east kicks up decent swells, so rather than beat against it all night, we anchor in Honda Bay, near Fondeado Island, right in time for sunset. Sitting on the bow, we watch bats streaming overhead, all headed the same direction. The moon rises, stars appearing one by one.

Ferdi treats us to a wonderful beef stew and mashed potatoes, and we watch **Ronin** in Nemo's — Dave's been talking it up for months, and I finally tracked down a copy in a little video shop back in Puerto.

January 7, 2001

Acting class in the morning — some real frustration surfaces for a few of us, the emotional weight of pride, something we all fall prey to more often than we'd like.

We raise anchor, the sea flat calm. Ten miles out we approach a submerged reef, Panglima Shoal. I pilot from the masthead, and we anchor in open water, thirty feet down.

A commando-style operation — the boat team at their most efficient, divers ready in no time. Twelve days now since our last dive.

The water around the shoal drops off surprisingly deep, six hundred fathoms — a dent in the shallow underwater shelf around Palawan.

A nice dive — a big turtle, rainbow runners, angelfish, real diversity in the fish life. But the coral's entirely dead, a genuine graveyard down there, huge porites heads standing like tombstones. Hard to say what caused such total destruction; no living coral anywhere nearby.

I spend a moment with a striped goby and its bright yellow shrimp partner, both digging steadily.

We raise anchor again around 5:00. I cook Sunday dinner with Steve — huge shrimp, risotto, carrots glazed in lemon and sugar, Chinese cabbage in a pesto sauce, the shrimp heads simmered all afternoon for stock. Back in the swing of cooking properly, maybe easier with just ten of us aboard.

We heave to for dinner, and I find myself oddly unable to give a proper speech — no one seems to notice, but I feel the words simply not coming.

January 8, 2001

Heading for Dumaran Island. I don't wake once through the night, sleeping under the stars like a child. Tomorrow's the full moon, so tonight she still holds part of herself back, though a wide glowing ring surrounds her.

*I am one of the richest men in the world,
although without any possessions,
I have all I need.
the biggest riches might be time.*

*and although I lose illusions every day,
I haven't stopped dreaming.*

We anchor at 1:00 on the lee side of Langaey Island. Cliffs rise straight from the sea; atop the island, a colonial house stands like a fortress.

We dive along the cliff edge — coral cover thin, but fish plentiful. A small school of tuna cruises past. The cliff drops underwater to sixty feet, giving way to sand, where we find gobies and sand perch carrying parasites, gorgeous soft coral swaying in the current.

A huge turtle passes, entirely unbothered by us.

A cave leads nearly to the cliff's edge — we spot a giant grouper inside, nearly my own size. Under a ledge, a blue-spotted stingray hides.

Coming up, Jason can't manage the anchor alone, so we take turns swimming for it. The moon's rising, full tomorrow.

Comments and observations — Orla gives a hilarious travel report on her five days working in an office, alongside one very large woman who snacked continuously at her desk, surrounded by condiments, taking orders for a cosmetics firm.

Then our turn comes, and I'm struck by what people remember, or choose to remember, from our whole Davao-to-Puerto passage. A little sad, honestly — so much effort, so little of it apparently sticking in memory. No mention of the whales, the wild dives, the Surigao Passage.

January 9, 2001

During the morning meeting I give a short talk on ethics — Rebecca and Heather went ashore yesterday without really engaging with the islanders they met.

The two of them have grown inseparable lately, a new couple aboard.

An early dive straight off the ship — the chain's draped over dead coral, and I play Hercules freeing it. The reef's in a sorry state, coral dead or dying throughout, but no dive is ever entirely without surprise, and I get a good moment with a school of striped catfish grazing the reef.

A jawfish peeks from its hole, gobies guarding their own little homes.

We raise anchor around 11:00, cruising along the east side of Langaey Island, cliffs standing sheer against the sky.

We anchor between Cotad and Mantulali Islands, sand bottom, the anchor perfectly set — should sleep well tonight.

We land at Cotad, wading through the shallows, Orla cutting her foot along the way. The beach is littered with shells and stray shoes.

Along the rocky shore we meet a woman and her children living in a hut — she's beautiful, offering us shells to take with us. But I have my sights set on climbing to the island's highest point, so we trace the beach through mangroves to a small settlement, where a man's rigging a lure I've never seen before — built around a nautilus shell with rubber-tipped hooks, almost resembling a chicken's foot.

We start climbing — slopes thick with sharp cutting grass, then a small stretch of jungle, moving carefully, cat-like, past thorny bushes, each plant with its own particular defenses.

We reach the top to a wild view of the ship below, and on the far side, a cliff dropping straight into the sea, the water wild with current, brave outriggers fishing far out in the distance.

Reaching the true summit feels like scaling a carpet of grass. We follow the cliff edge carefully, birds singing or startling into flight as we pass. Real peace up here, wind carrying our sweat away, grass bending in long waves with each gust.

Uncertain whether we'll make the other side before dark, the sun dropping lower, hoarding what light remains.

We crawl beneath low bushes, skin scratched and lacerated, something like an initiation rite. Thorns everywhere, a clear reminder we're in genuinely wild country — no trail here, just the land as it actually is.

We finally reach the beach, the effort more than worth it — sunset now, mangrove shadows lengthening as we walk the rocky shoreline back.

The old woman's still there waiting, her children beside her, more shells in hand.

The full moon clears the peak above us.

That night, a total lunar eclipse.

January 10, 2001

Sun just up, and we're off for a dive, dropping along a cliff edge — a genuinely surreal landscape. On the sand at fifty feet, a huge stingray startles off. A school of jacks comes to inspect.

Such diversity of fish here, coral finding purchase wherever it can on the rock, mostly soft coral gardens. Lionfish tucked into every crack.

I prepare a cake — Orla's birthday today. White chocolate mousse layered between sponge cake soaked in Frangelico.

I spend the rest of the morning processing images from recent dives.

Acting class in the afternoon — we begin work on a new play. Rebecca seems lost, some vague sense of style but clearly no real thought behind it, unwilling to push further. The more experienced hands carry it instead; Ferdi steps in, and we get the first scene underway.

A magical dive — we hit a meeting of currents just before sunset. As we drop, clouds of silverfish perform their survival dance, hunted by patrolling mackerel.

Big boulders and canyons, soft coral swaying with the current. A school of jacks cruises past, an eagle ray in the distance.

In the crevasses, as many as a dozen lionfish shelter from the current.

Pufferfish, crocodilefish, scorpionfish, fusiliers, and the largest concentration of emperor angelfish I've ever seen.

We wind through a genuine labyrinth — one of the best dives yet, the kind that keeps pulling you further.

Orla's birthday turns out quiet — the generator's water pump springs a leak, and Maik steps away from the engine room to join dinner instead. No music, no noise, just the moon rising over the island. Peaceful, exactly how I know Orla would want it.

The cake's a hit, and Sam and Steve's skit — a parody of the two of us, using my own clothes — has everyone in stitches, my sides aching from laughing.

No one can stand the silence for long afterward, so the jokes start, running until no one can remember any more.

We lie on top of Nemo's afterward, the underwater world still fresh in our minds, the full moon overhead.

My dreams stay vivid, though I lose them almost the moment I wake.

January 11, 2001

We raise anchor at 6:00 a.m., light coating everything in silver. Catag stirs to life.

Approaching Taytay Bay, a storm passes just wide of us, coloring the sky a deep, glorious gray. I watch the clouds shift, letting the sun reappear.

The greatest show on earth unfolds — light in constant motion, each minute carrying its own distinct mood.

We anchor around 4:00 p.m. in front of Dadaliten Island, waiting for the sun to set over Elephant Island and Nabat Island — a good cocktail in hand, camera ready to catch a single instant of light.

We read from **Mount Analogue** — group dynamics fully on display in the discussion afterward, what "superior" even means, argued in what feels like a fairly obtuse voice. Rebecca seems to be quietly, almost strategically resisting our shipboard rhythm — obvious to me, if not to everyone.

She's meant to direct a piece but refuses to take part in any of the acting exercises herself.

My own response is simply to let it be, rather than let frustration take hold.

Her connection with Heather seems to be taking its toll too — she manages her, much as she does Steve. What's actually going on in her mind I can't say for certain, though I can guess.

Maik and I watch **Bringing Out the Dead**, Scorsese — a wild ride through New York.

January 12, 2001

A heavenly sunrise over Dadaliten. Lab in the morning, then we split into two groups to explore the surrounding islands.

Maik finally gets the portable dive compressor running that morning — sitting unused on a shelf for two years, working at last.

We take the small boat toward Nabat Island, its shape catching our eye during last night's sunset.

We approach the cliff face — overhangs, stalactites reaching toward the sea, swallows darting in and out.

We land on the west side, where two young men are camped, guarding the swiftlet nests — the setting reminds me of Borneo.

I start climbing. The limestone's razor-sharp; reaching the top, the view takes my breath away — the reef clearly visible below, untouched, its patterns almost psychedelic in the unspoiled stone.

Getting down proves the real challenge — one wrong move and the rock itself could do real damage. I trace the cliff face, hands and body fully attuned to the island, every movement deliberate. Swallows overhead the whole way down.

I'm not entirely sure I'll make it at points, backtracking more than once.

Every step brings me closer to the sea, until, at the edge, there's nothing left but to jump.

I snorkel along the drop-off — the reef top's been heavily dynamited, though schools of minnows swarm everywhere regardless. Under the cliffs, a tall garden of seaweed sways with the current; needlefish hunt near the surface, a school of jacks cruising through.

The current runs fierce through the pass — a genuinely magic moment.

Back aboard, we raise the small boat and anchor together, sunset glowing over Nabat Island behind us.

A route meeting with strat command, locking in our plans for the coming days.

Comments and observations — I'd meant to stay quiet, but end up speaking plainly about the slack that's crept into our shipboard rhythm lately. A little confrontation, bringing things to the surface. I ask, simply, why everyone's actually here. At least it's out in the open now.

We need to reach a certain point by daybreak, with no detailed chart for a twenty-mile stretch ahead. Lucky for us, the weather stays mild, just enough breeze from the north to keep things comfortable.

January 13, 2001

The fridge-freezer's broken — a fair amount of cheese and spread lost overnight. The generator's not in the best shape either; Maik and Ferdi manage to repair the freshwater pump, though a seal's leaking and needs urgent replacement, likely ordered from the States and shipped via courier to Puerto.

We pass islands dotting the horizon, and around 2:00 p.m. approach our anchorage off Guintungauan Island, three miles south of the tip of Coron Island.

I take the small boat out alone to the tip of Coron — needing a couple of hours to myself.

The scenery ranks among the most spectacular I've ever seen, the climber in me stirred by limestone cliffs shooting skyward. I enter a cove of crystal-clear water, ringed by cliffs and dreamlike rock formations, following the coastline out to Coron's tip.

I stop by a fishing boat hauling long ropes strung with plastic bags — used to herd fish into their nets.

A few bottlenose dolphins play nearby, leaping occasionally, waiting for whatever the nets might spill.

I hang there a while, genuinely happy. I notice them when I need to, and I'm grateful for whatever it is in me that draws them close in moments like this. Thank you.

Entranced by the beauty of the place, I ride back, trolling a line without any luck.

Bancas run up and down the reef, all of us sharing the same small ritual of hope over each cast.

The pork comes out of the oven perfectly. Sauerkraut, and a relaxed dinner on deck.

January 14, 2001

I lead acting class in the morning, working through it together — breakdown exercises first, then stretches, some yoga, molding work. I move through the different energy states as we go.

Then gestures of revelation, effort patterns, and a resist-and-clone reconstruction exercise.

We split into groups, the assigned theme an aquarium. Ferdi and Maik play sumo-wrestling carp, Japanese-style, while I play the court biologist observing them, eventually stepping in myself — the birth of sumo, essentially.

Steve plays a fish in a restaurant tank; Orla, the waitress, feeds him happily at first. Susie plays a customer, studying the menu, then the fish, and orders him. The "combat" begins as Orla tries to catch him, the impatient customer waiting, until Orla and Steve wrestle it out in the water and the fish finally reaches the table.

Rebecca, Sam, Jason, and Heather play various coral creatures, apparently consuming each other. A good session overall.

We send the small boat out for a dive at the point, and with a skeleton crew aboard, raise anchor and move the ship to meet them. A couple of bottlenose dolphins surface briefly. We heave to near the cliffs, taking in the scenery.

We dive along the drop-off; Orla and I swim toward the cliff edges, the light turning magical, green at moments.

Small caves, bleached coral rubble crunching against a tiny beach.

We keep surfacing just enough to catch both worlds, above and below.

We move three miles further to anchor, passing within two cables of the cliffs, everyone snapping photos of the striking scene.

The anchorage runs deep; sudden gusts start hitting us — a domino effect rolling down off the cliffs. Reminds me of rough sailing around Madagascar once, gusts coming from every direction.

Sunday dinner — the wind arrives in distinct waves, gusting to forty knots at times. I suspect pressure building along the cliff tops, then releasing all at once, like a wave breaking. The whole night follows the same pattern; I can't sleep properly, waking repeatedly. We drag about half a cable overall.

Some kind of pressure-buildup mechanism, releasing the gusts in sudden bursts. Come morning, it's clear the mates didn't sleep well either — a good sign, honestly, that everyone's attention stayed sharp through it.

January 15, 2001

We raise anchor at 8:00 a.m., heading for Tangat Island, where most of the region's shipwrecks are said to lie.

By 1:00 we're anchored near a pearl farm, a dive boat already moored on a nearby buoy. We know roughly where the Tangat wreck sits.

I motor over to them — most wrecks marked with black buoys, all within about two miles of each other.

First wreck, near the pearl farm: the Tangat Wreck.

We drop to sixty-five feet to reach the deck, near the bow — a Japanese freighter, a hundred and twenty-two meters long, five thousand gross tons, sunk September 24, 1944, by US aircraft. She sits nearly upright, a slight fifteen-degree list to port, hull resting at thirty-two meters, thick with sponge growth, lionfish everywhere.

Everyone gets a turn diving her.

We watch a modern retelling of **Romeo and Juliet** in Nemo's, and eat well off Ferdi's cooking, Sam pitching in too.

That night the coast guard visits, asking us to relocate — the pearl farm's wary of boats anchoring nearby overnight, oysters being notoriously sensitive. Given the growth already covering the wrecks, they're clearly thriving regardless.

January 16, 2001

We move to the middle of the bay and begin a proper diving marathon — everyone gets two dives today, on two different wrecks.

First morning wreck: the Irako. A Japanese refrigerated supply ship, a hundred and forty-seven meters long, 9,570 gross tons, sitting nearly upright with a slight port list. Main deck at thirty-five meters. We're

greeted by a bold school of batfish, swimming right up to the camera. Beautiful structure, twenty meters of visibility. Groupers and snapper shelter in the cargo holds, though depth limits how far we can safely penetrate. Lionfish again everywhere, some impressively large.

Second wreck: the Olympia Maru. Hull at nineteen to twenty-five meters. Another Japanese freighter, a hundred and thirty-seven meters, 5,617 gross tons, lying on her starboard side. The hull's thick with lettuce coral, brain coral, hydroids everywhere, fusiliers, damselfish, cardinalfish hovering throughout. Scorpionfish scattered everywhere too — a real treat for the camera. Lionfish, razorfish, groupers, snapper.

The penetration dive is wild, openings everywhere — a genuine monument to nature, an instrument of war transformed into an underwater masterpiece.

On the surface, a huge jellyfish drifts by, its slow, spacey movement genuinely mesmerizing.

Back aboard, prepping for strat command — our Coron schedule. Little time, plenty still to accomplish; the crew needs consistent direction and push, so it all needs careful organization.

On top of that, generator parts need to be rushed here urgently, one freezer's dead, and the rigging needs attention before we tackle the South China Sea crossing.

We move to Uson Island, anchoring in eighteen fathoms — scenery straight out of a dream, light catching every cliff and hill in the distance, tree silhouettes standing sharp against the sky.

I climb the mast to watch sunset — stories unfolding in the clouds, a real three-dimensional quality to it, light practically shouting toward heaven in celebration. Every sky has its own peak moment during the day; this one outdid all the rest from the past several months.

Genuinely high, on beauty alone.

For Tuesday night, everyone brings a memory from the trip to share, trying to crystallize a few before they slip away entirely.

Wind picks up overnight, strong gusts, thirty to forty knots at times. The anchor holds, though sleep proves harder to come by.

January 17, 2001

We move the ship to Coron, arriving around noon. I clear us in with officials and handle the mail, incoming and outgoing.

As always, approaching a town, however modest, seems to exert its own gravitational pull — everyone growing restless, when only hours ago we were surrounded by some of the most pristine environment imaginable.

January 18, 2001

Rigging work. I start the day laying out what needs finishing before departure — a puzzle balancing everyone's time ashore for communication, a planned trip to the lake, and pushing the ship closer to fully shipshape.

I spend half the morning aloft, inspecting, greasing, oiling blocks and shrouds.

Into town to handle communications, plane tickets, and the freezer situation.

News on Cambodia — we're proceeding regardless of the permit and visa situation, working it out once we're there.

January 19, 2001

Lab, with real insight into evolution, watching humanity from a slight remove.

A trip to the lake — a genuine wonderland, entirely outside time and space.

*Needles rising from the depths,
shrimp nibbling at my toes,
I glide, weightless, through pinnacles.
an underwater cathedral, a monument to nature.*

Brenda's back, arriving with films, dive pump parts, books, and stories.

January 20, 2001

Trip to the lake. We rise before dawn — coffee, dive gear, cameras — reaching the lake entrance as the sky lightens. I'm on a personal mission to capture the place's particular magic; everyone else focused on the same task.

Underwater, my mind wanders freely. I hit the thermocline, forty-five to fifty degrees Celsius. But it's the rock formations that truly speak — I can almost hear a choir in them. A temple to beauty, hidden from the ordinary eye.

A mad scramble in town, clearing out, booking tickets from El Nido back to Puerto, last emails, cigarettes.

Ferdi raises anchor and pilots us out of the harbor. I spend the time processing images from our trip.

January 21, 2001

We enter Bacuit Bay early morning, the wind kind enough to let us sail the right direction the whole way. Heavenly scenery greets us — sheer cliffs, caves,

crevasses, the bay itself calm, water murky and silted,
though it lends the whole scene a ghostly quality.

*Orion high in the sky, not a cloud, mysteries of an
open sky.
break on to the other side,
mind, glide, free as can be for now,
the sea, flat, reflects the stars.
simplicity,
no brain-fucked mind games,
no illusory, delusional belief,
just the certainty of being alive.
a gift of time, a celebration for Kronos,
Kronos ticking,
destruction of immortality,
the child comes,
allowing the old ones to die,
only to be reborn,
globalization,
a cure or a cancer, feeding on our soul,
transformation, liberalization,
a new jail, a new wall,
or a superhighway?
isn't the road itself the journey?
destinations.
love,
real,
a chemical invasion,
for total ecstasy,
give me some loving,
says the earth to man,
discovery,
a place,
where one can remain free,
if freedom ever existed,
hosted by the origin of ourselves,
guided by spirited intelligence,
dolphins,
sounds, vibrations,*

*opening grids,
transformations.
the way of a modern shaman,
channeling the five gates —
art, science, nature, love, and the technosphere-
shipsphere-island-home,
more gates still to be discovered,
only to merge again,
to love again.
I learned to wait,
and, in part, I learned simply to be.
a dependence on energy,
my own dependence on the moment.
opening the gate,
opening the gate,
entrance,
perceptions,
shift,
move,
twirl,
spin,
vibrations,
energy,
nothing,
water,
tree,
wind,
rock, needles.
blur.*

Around 4:00 we take the small boat along the cliffs, coming to an opening in the rock — an entrance leading to a natural cathedral, stalagmites and stalactites throughout. The setting sun catches the surrounding stone.

January 22, 2001

Inside a cave near Pinagbuyutan Island, in the El Nido area.

*a celebration of the moment,
sparkles,
the sea glitters,
drops sing their small songs as they meet the
waves,
we enter the cathedral,
carved from rock by the elements,
greens playing psychedelic games,
the waves won't let you linger too long.
like a sacred place,
an altar standing without an icon,
the icon is nature herself,
in all her beauty,
the sun playing designer,
enchanted gold leaf laid over the rocks,
reenacting old stories,
lights!
the cliffs chanting their evening stars,
Sirius rising,
children playing on a nearby beach,
an emotional ride,
the elements coming to the rescue,
the gong of beauty,
always remembered the moment it strikes,
like a blow,
you know you're alive in a place like this,
love is everywhere,
love is beside me and around me,
there is no around or beside — only everywhere,
all at once.*

A reconciliation with poetry. We're anchored off Lagen Island, in Bacuit Bay, having sailed through the night.

stars,

*shooting stars,
remembering,
Eros in full reincarnation,
seizing a moment,
sweat, movement, fluid as the sea,
merging with the elements,
a ritual union with everything,
losing it, touching it, feeling it, being it,
only to lose it again.
hands,
caresses,
the wind on my skin,
space.*

January 22, 2001 (continued)

The crew splits into two teams to explore the area. We choose the cathedral cave first — music inside, flutes, voices, didgeridoo, all offering their own hymn to the place, before climbing further in from within, and a second cave, bats overhead, climbing carefully through the dark.

January 23, 2001

Acting class — working with the cave's natural acoustics, voice and flute together. We move the ship to Miniloc, and take a ride to a nearby beach.

January 24, 2001

A morning dive, then a visit to the Secret Lagoon, and an evening spent singing along the rocks.

January 25, 2001

Lab on deck, and we move the ship closer to El Nido town.

Chapter Ten

El Nido, Palawan, Philippines

January 28, 2001

El Nido town wakes to a concerto of roosters.

Fishermen bring their catch to market — I wonder where they still manage to find any. They know the hidden lairs of grouper still.

From a dirt airstrip, the plane takes off, and I sit close to the pilot, eyes glued to the window. We trace the coastline, revealing every reef below — nothing hidden from up here. Rivers and settlements silting the reefs, erosion visible everywhere, fish traps laid out in careful geometric patterns wherever the water runs shallow, bancas scattered like small dots against the blue.

Around Puerto, the shallows look like paintings, fish traps drawn out in straight lines and angles — the unmistakable signature of the human mind, its impossible straight lines.

The town feels familiar — flashes of people I've met, shops I know. The usual chaos of tricycles running up and down Rizal Avenue.

I have most of an afternoon free. I stay at Banwa, a place that feels like home to me.

Art everywhere there, pleasing to both eye and mind in the middle of the city.

Meeting John and Jane, we head to the market together to organize food. I work with an older woman at one of the covered stalls, methodically writing out what's available as we move through the aisles.

I feel like I'm on a mission — barely thirty-six hours to get it all done.

It's Sunday; every official building and business is closed.

January 29, 2001

The market's alive this morning. We load food onto "Sweety," the jeepney that will carry everything to El Nido.

First stop, immigration — the impossible somehow achieved. "No one can help you," they tell me — the boss is out of town for a week. I call customs instead.

They show up but can't actually do anything beyond throwing around impressive-sounding phrases. We try reaching the boss by phone, no answer. I'm told to come back that afternoon.

The post office holds a stack of packages for Sam — her Christmas presents. I wouldn't be surprised if something's gone missing along the way; the whole system amuses me at this point.

I'm asked to open a parcel for customs, though the officer only wants it open, not actually examined — lunch is coming up and she's ready to go. Still, procedure has to be followed.

I race to the jeepney terminal to oversee loading our fruit and vegetables, all crated in wooden boxes and baskets, prices negotiated on the spot. Sweety heads off toward El Nido with over three hundred kilos of organic bounty.

DHL delivers the generator parts.

Banks and money changers next — I withdraw two thousand dollars in pesos, converting half back into dollars to repay travel deposits as soon as we arrive.

Back to immigration.

Around 6:30, the immigration officer's wife arrives at the office with an old stamp and clears us out herself.

The warriors rest, for a second.

An Indian gentleman at Bruno's, and the whole cast of expat stories floating around Palawan — a Frenchman who built a house on the bay, obsessed with spearfishing, who's watched the reef's decline firsthand through his own countless hours in the water.

Another Frenchman, Philippe, is cycling around the world. His stories range from cooking for the Sultan of Brunei — a cake so enormous the doors had to be demolished to get it through — to now working with another man in southern Palawan to preserve a remaining stretch of untouched forest.

At the table, Bruno, fifty-five, from the same region of France as me, with his Filipino partner. For the first time in ages, I speak my own native language, the one I was raised in.

My hands are full of the day's treasures and small victories —

— though, as I'd learn soon enough, celebrating too early would prove my undoing.

I catch a tricycle on Rizal Avenue, my attention drifting somewhere else entirely. Outside Banwa, I unload the boxes, setting the pouch containing everything — passport, cash, ship's papers — down for just a moment, and the tricycle drives off with it still inside.

For some reason I'd been carrying all the money in there too, something I never normally do — even seven hundred dollars set aside from the ship for buying vegetables.

At first I'm not even sure it was in the tricycle. Maybe I left it at Bruno's — close by, so I decide to wait until morning to check.

A real possibility of disaster.

January 30, 2001

*defeat snatched from the jaws of victory,
the guard dropped for one unexplainable minute,
the Buddha with the burning candle never found
the answer,
but keeps asking the question anyway.
he follows me around in different postures,
the Zen master told me not to ask why,
while Descartes stepped in for a word.
meanwhile, fighting guilt with humor for a
moment,
action, action,
rest only fuel for more action.
consciousness regained with a slap to the face,
humility forced onto the invincible fool,
putting the mind back in its place.
no room here for mistakes.
cause and effect, under the magnifying glass.*

5 a.m., flashlight in hand at Bruno's, I scan the counter through the gap in the iron gate. My heart starts racing. And what if —

I head back to the guesthouse, lie down with a few more pages of *Atlas Shrugged*, trying not to let my mind run toward the worst.

I race back to Bruno's around 7:30, coming in with what must be a look of pure despair. The pouch isn't there.

It had been in the tricycle that drove off the day before. Thirteen passports, two thousand dollars cash, thirty thousand pesos, the ship's papers, customs and immigration clearance — all of it.

The worst possible outcome. My worst nightmare, realized.

I contact the local radio station — the message plays out between cheap love songs and powdered milk commercials.

A police report, and the start of an investigation.

I put gas in the police car myself. We start with the money changers, in case anyone suspicious shows up trying to exchange cash.

Though I already suspect it's mostly theater on the officer's part — he heads off for lunch and I'll likely never see him again.

I give an interview to another radio station, appealing to the good nature of the Filipino people to return the pouch.

Then a visit to the local tricycle drivers' association.

The real obstacle is the money itself. Whoever's holding it now has ten years' worth of ordinary salary in his hands. Any word he lets slip risks giving him away — as long as he stays hidden, he's relatively safe. The police will certainly be looking for him, not over the passports, but the cash. An average Filipino salary runs around four thousand pesos a month.

My mind spins through every possibility — an emotional ride for a while, fending off guilt and anger to stay focused on the task. I can't undo what's already happened. The damage is done; now I'm simply gathering the pieces.

I send word back to the States.

I miss my return flight, and that evening Ferdi calls Banwa — by now everyone involved knows what's happened.

I notify customs and immigration formally.

Part of the night I spend cruising strange corners of town, talking to any tricycle driver I can find.

But as time passes, the odds of recovery shrink steadily.

I must have flagged down thirty tricycles that day. The first thing I do now, every time, is note the vehicle number and driver — a reflex that's come far too late to help.

January 31, 2001

More time chasing down tricycle drivers.

Communication plans — Gaie and I work through the various scenarios for picking up the pieces.

By now my focus has shifted entirely to recovery — gathering what's needed to replace the passports and ship's papers.

I start calling every embassy. Some I can never reach anyone at all. Online, I fall into a strange world of politics and bureaucracy — the individual citizen reduced, it seems, to a mere number. The whole apparatus of embassies carries a certain scent of secrecy and quiet business dealings. I learn everyone will need to appear in person in Manila to complete the formalities.

Weighing schedules, logistics, risk, and opportunity, it becomes clear we'd lose far more by pursuing that route. First, time — even in the best case, we'd have to rush to Cambodia afterward to meet our commitments there. Second, the risk of sending the whole crew into Manila, a genuinely unstable and dangerous city right now, daily protests over President Estrada's impeachment for corruption, occasional bombings. Third, the legal entanglement with immigration, who'd have real leverage over us — and likely more money to extract if they could. Fourth, a skeleton crew left running the ship

for a week or more without its captain, morale wearing thin, supplies dwindling.

Then it clicks — why not Singapore instead? Cambodia's situation remains uncertain anyway, its own political climate far from settled, the former Khmer Rouge leadership only now facing trial.

After a flurry of emails, we settle on Singapore — a place we know, with real contacts and far more efficient bureaucracy. Not to mention minimizing our losses generally.

February 1, 2001

More time at the police station, filing a formal statement of loss — repeated visits, each requiring some new document, an official letter of request each time.

A conversation at immigration — the seemingly impossible somehow made possible. I manage to convince the officer in charge that simply letting us go, clearing me out officially, is genuinely the best outcome for everyone. I make clear I have no more money to offer, and that if further payment were required, it would need to go through Manila directly — not mentioning, of course, all the paperwork already filed in Puerto that would then need to be dug back up, at real cost to his own time.

He finally writes out a letter of clearance, and we're legally free to leave the Philippines.

Meanwhile I keep one line open for recovering the passports — through Trattoria, the main hub for tourists, information, and expats, I connect with a media contact who broadcasts one more appeal. Time being so short, I offer a reward for the pouch's return — ten thousand pesos.

The bank agrees to release cash without my passport on file — they know my face well by now, and the manager's genuinely helpful. I settle my remaining bills and make one last round talking to tricycle drivers.

But whoever's responsible is clearly staying well hidden — people are tracking him now, not out of concern for the passports, but for the money itself. At four thousand pesos a typical monthly wage, he's holding roughly five years' income in his hands.

February 2, 2001

Last emails, goodbyes to John and Jane, to Trattoria.

The flight back.

The ride to El Nido.

Back to the ship.

A meeting — and a pod of whales comes close, as if in welcome, a real boost of energy.

A night out, and the crew's reaction to everything that's happened.

February 3, 2001

Strat command, getting the ship ready. Last of the food loaded aboard.

We depart for Singapore.

The wind's with us, sails full, and for a moment the sky lets me forget everything else entirely.

Voyage from El Nido to Singapore

February 4, 2001

A day at sea. How far I'd had to travel from her, in every sense. The sails are full now, wind out of the northeast. Dolphins surface in the afternoon, forty meters off.

February 6, 2001

A lazy day atop Nemo's, reading and reading and reading — haven't had the chance to do that properly in far too long.

I cook Tuesday dinner, theme of myth, though not much really comes of the evening's discussion — not enough energy left to fuel it properly.

February 7, 2001

Five knots, the ship riding the swells, wind six points off the stern.

I come out of my own dream a little more at peace today — the specter that's been haunting me slowly loosening its grip as I gather some strength back.

February 8, 2001

An emotional day. Words feel hard to retrieve. The sea roars; the rigging laments. I sink into a kind of nothingness — nothing feels particularly urgent right now. My mind stays blank, refusing to think; my body refuses to move. I simply lie still, tired, questioning everything.

February 9, 2001

all and everything,

*visible and invisible,
synergetically interconnected,
the truth of it all, comprehended and not,
the totality of thought,
dream and imagination,
and their cause and effect,
reaching to the universe,
and universes,
all infinities,
known and unknown,
to every discovery man has made,
past, present, and future,
to every thought man has had,
past, present, and future,
to evolution itself.*

February 11, 2001

*the wind shifts,
the watch on the helm slow to react,
the ship jibes.
sun-weakened blocks and lines finally snap.
we tack back onto course.
an accident sequence,
the war against triggers,
fought before they're ever pulled.
I take the lead,
steering us back toward safety.
the swells keep rising, higher and higher,
wind four points off.*

Pulling out a book on Chinese junks, I start reconsidering our rigging, sketching out better-performing sheets, improving on our current setup.

We have Sunday dinner in Synesthesia — penne with a blue cheese sauce, meatballs.

I give a short talk on freedom and cultural conditioning.

We've all been shaped by our own respective countries, taught to believe our own way is simply the right one, and we grow thoroughly convinced of it. Cultural patterns show up clearly aboard, pushing us slowly toward some future idea of world citizenship. However fine an idea, the reality still comes down to individual minds fully grasping it — starting with a real look at our own values, and what qualities we actually want to embody.

The sheer volume of literature now available worldwide, and the steadily growing access to once-hidden knowledge, makes it clear that for the first time, real change in human thought and action feels genuinely possible — not some distant utopia, but a real, present opportunity.

It's no longer really a matter of utopian dreaming, but of humanity's own survival. Technological advances and discoveries across every scientific field have brought us to a point in our evolution that's genuinely unprecedented.

As always, though, it's in the practical application of those discoveries that our future truly rests.

February 12, 2001

Wind dropped overnight, rain clouds surrounding us. The swells keep the rigging banging around uncomfortably. We jibe deliberately, under control, the wind too light for a proper tack.

So we zigzag south, trying to pass the Anambas Islands on their southern side.

Rain pours down, and a few leaks start showing. I step in when needed — two people currently out with something, Maik and Dave.

Rain drives everyone below, and real vigilance is needed to keep the ship tidy under the circumstances. Water sloshes around in Synesthesia; the water tanks, not fully sealed, leak whenever the ship heels over.

Nemo's turns into a dormitory.

The idea of freedom isn't really about doing whatever one wants whenever one wants — it's recognizing what needs doing that others aren't doing. Otherwise your freedom simply comes at someone else's expense, and that's not freedom at all.

I've been running acting class the past two days. Given the ship's motion, I've focused both sessions on voice and sound work instead of movement.

Acting class one: exercises in natural voice, lying flat, focused on diaphragm and belly breathing.

We talk through some basics — that no one is born with language, that we learn entirely through imitation, first from parents, then from our wider social world, which accounts for accent and dialect. With radio and television, language took another leap, offering role models to an ever-wider audience, pushing gradually toward something like a shared world language. Different languages carry their own distinct tone, accent, even underlying sound quality.

An exercise: to interrupt the usual thinking process and notice the mechanical nature of speech itself, we each talk continuously for three minutes, simply letting whatever comes out come out. I offer prompts — raise the voice, lower it, notice how the words themselves shift.

We notice recurring patterns, repeated words.

Then a circle, each person exploring vowel sounds in turn — A, I, O, U, "ou," E — gestures allowed too.

Then a single sentence, each person instructed to alter tone, pitch, and phrasing, changing its apparent meaning each time.

We talk through the body's different resonating chambers — chest, belly, crown, back of the head, nose, throat, genitals.

Then a few basic principles for giving a speech: beginning, middle, end, the ending visualized as "throwing the spear" — a speech as a clear statement making its point. Delivery: voice, intonation, accentuation, breath, posture, projection, rhythm, pace.

Everyone takes five minutes to prepare, then delivers a short speech.

We discuss each one afterward — noticing involuntary gestures, vocal tics, moments where the point got lost in its own delivery.

What actually made a speech land well, it turns out, wasn't so much the content as the form of delivery itself. Jason wins every round. Holding some real inner tension and channeling it directly into the delivery seems to be the key.

We lie back afterward, reflecting on the session together.

February 13, 2001

Moving between general principles of physics and theories arising from purely random observation, without formal study but drawing instead on memory, on experiences that stay traceable, connectable, somewhere in the mind.

The expansion of the mind, and its present limits, comes down mostly to the tools available — body and mind together, functioning as recordable, communicable instruments. The real limits sit within.

Perception — not just sensory, but shaped by the body-mind's own chemistry working in synergy.

The range of visual combination remains finite, bound by the nature of the medium itself.

Singapore

February 21, 2001

We dock at the marina, given prime position — right on the first berth. Tricky maneuvering, narrow quarters for our wide hull, and we haven't spent real time at a dock since Bali, a year and a half ago now.

In all that time we've spent maybe six days total tied up at a pier — a remarkable run of open ocean.

Marina staff are wonderfully helpful, and we feel genuinely welcomed. We arrive five days ahead of schedule, with nowhere sensible to simply wait outside.

February 24, 2001

The ship celebrates her twenty-sixth birthday, and I turn thirty-five.

A proper sea-people celebration, sailors from other yachts stopping by to pay their respects to the black ship.

We decorate the deck, set up a frozen-drink station, smooth music playing, a massive spread of food laid out for the occasion.

Warren, of the open-ocean-loving sea-people tribe, arrives with his Vietnamese wife.

February 28, 2001

In Singapore seven days now, in a nonstop marathon of logistics.

The ship's papers arrived yesterday — a huge relief, weeks of accumulated pressure finally released all at once.

Ferdi, Maik, and I now hold our own passports again. Orla, Heather, and Sam's are on their way; Dave collects his tomorrow.

Jason decides to leave the ship with Warren, joining an expedition heading north toward Sulawesi — two months earlier than his original plan called for. I understand the pull of it, even if it's another small drain on our resources. It's always wiser to let people go freely when the desire's genuinely there — the worst outcome, by far, is someone who doesn't actually want to be here staying anyway.

March 15, 2001

Nonstop motion, a mad modern dance of words, dreams, footsteps — swallowed whole by a city-state that leaves little room for stillness.

I haven't kept up with writing this — a discipline I clearly couldn't sustain here.

Like a thick stew, moments from these past weeks keep surfacing.

With Paulo, head veterinarian at the Singapore Zoo, I tour the park. A baby elephant, freshly bruised from a scuffle with another young male, still greets me warmly, trunk extended in hello. I like his eyes — young, innocent, still entirely untouched by the world.

We watch a troop of orangutans, noting the social hierarchy, the behavior patterns — we're still very much

primates ourselves. The orangutans imitate people constantly. Paulo tells stories — one particularly resourceful engineer among them fabricated his own brush after watching zookeepers paint the exhibit frame, using mud to "paint" the wooden posts of his enclosure, carefully hiding his tools between attempts so the keepers wouldn't find them.

The alpha male shows off in one corner, moving slowly, or resting in a thoughtful pose. Younger ones play nearby.

In the chimpanzee exhibit, a group socializes without any vocal communication at all — constant touch instead, tactile conversation, hands on faces.

The parallels to our own life aboard come easily. We're essentially in our own kind of enclosure too, twelve or fifteen of the same species, confined together.

The stern became, for a while, the ship's real social hub — where conversation happened, purely social, rarely substantial. It genuinely doesn't matter what's discussed there; most of it's forgotten within the hour. But it serves its purpose regardless — simple companionship, talk for talk's sake.

Different cultures aboard develop their own social patterns. With six Americans currently aboard, gesture, tone, and general cultural instinct become easy to observe.

Everyone, eventually, starts to shine with their own particular character. After enough acting classes and enough months at sea, masks simply can't hold for long. Those who stubbornly try to keep one on end up quietly suffocating under it, unless they throw themselves into constant socializing to keep it propped up.

A reality check on the coral side too — hardly represented in this environment at all. The Zoo offers

such rich material for comments and observation that I dedicate a whole session to free association around it.

Even here, at what feels like the peak of information culture, most of the truly lasting ideas still travel through spoken word rather than any broadcast medium — media presence notwithstanding, everywhere.

Interviews, too, with the various media contacts hungry for content — Kim, planning two articles; Raffles Marina's magazine getting a refresh; the maritime organization needing more material.

Then a real artist — Bob Chappell, a genuine talent. We meet with real humility on both sides, an instant mutual respect. His mastery of light and creative instinct comes through clearly in his work — one film on Indonesian theater moves me like few films ever have. His ethics run deep too, with little room for compromise, which creates some visible tension with another figure, Francis Lee, over differing views on conservation.

Brad had mentioned him to me before, and now I understand why — if a real film were ever made about the Heraclitus, Bob would be the one to shoot it.

Then James Cameron, arriving alongside Jean-Michel Cousteau, last surviving heir to a great ocean-exploration legacy. Real connection there too.

I admit to him honestly that I'd carried some mixed feelings going in, but his presence dissolves them almost immediately. He opens up in turn — carrying real weight, the responsibility of a famous family name, only now feeling free to voice his own opinions without risking the legacy his father built over decades. He acknowledges past mistakes, but insists the underlying intention was always a genuine love for the ocean. As he puts it, only the people who never do anything at all manage to avoid making mistakes.

James and I talk through everything — underwater technique, evolution, space exploration, leadership.

The two of them are forming an alliance, planning a major expedition exploring the ocean, working the media at real scale. That Cameron's turning his own craft toward something in service of nature gives me real hope.

Both of them clearly understand how much of the earth still remains unexplored — the ocean's true depths chief among it.

We'll meet again, I'm certain of that.

A dinner with the full crew, wine flowing — someone recalls the old story of the Calypso carrying two tanks of water and one of red wine, brushing teeth with wine in a pinch.

Kim Loo and Gaelan visit too, more film talk.

The crew's grown notably more media-savvy lately — Orla with her background as a producer and director, Aram as a lighting technician and photographer, Inge as a writer.

Maybe we're finally reaching a point where there's enough combined knowledge and skill aboard to actually produce something of real quality.

For myself, it raises the bar — all my trial and error making clear that producing anything worthwhile now requires a bit more discipline, more genuine attention to craft. I've carried the flag this far regardless.

The first week here's been a blur of chasing down passports and ship's papers, a real education in just how dependent — and, at the same time, privileged — we are within the larger machinery of paperwork and international legality.

Messages, bus rides, faxes, communication, politics.

Then the whole dry-dock chapter unfolds, another round of meeting genuinely great people. It's always been the soul and sweat of individuals that truly powers this expedition — the Heraclitus survives because of exactly that.

Paulo and I visit Sentosa Island to see the "pink dolphins" — Indo-Pacific humpback dolphins, coastal by nature, well suited to the exhibit's design. A lagoon's been dug out, constantly refreshed with seawater, though not every dolphin here gets along — originally purchased by a wealthy Thai businessman who kept them in a private pond.

Two younger dolphins perform a show; an old, gentle female stays to herself; another older male stays secluded entirely, refusing to cooperate.

All the trainers are Japanese. I don't especially enjoy the scene — something about it feels more like control than relationship, master over subject rather than partnership. When I approach the pond, the dolphins come over to greet me, but the trainer immediately blows his whistle, calling for a trained behavior instead — morning hunger working in his favor.

The show draws a large crowd, mostly Japanese visitors, and does function, in the end, as a decent educational tool.

I leave feeling a little sad, especially saying goodbye — wishing I'd had the chance to simply spend quiet time with them, no whistle involved.

We also visit the Underwater World aquarium, going behind the scenes to weigh a baby dugong rescued two or three years back — gaining roughly a kilo each month now.

The exhibit itself is well done, though it leans heavily on danger — poisonous this, poisonous that, everywhere you look.

Reserve sharks and fish live in separate holding tanks; I suspect plenty die and need regular replacing.

Once again I leave without much real enthusiasm, especially knowing the scale of business behind it all. They've had real success breeding fish here, hoping to sell them to aquariums worldwide — but most aquariums already have their own supply networks, meaning more fish pulled straight from the wild regardless.

Driving around the city, I can't help noticing the sheer scale of the technosphere here, endlessly hungry for more — and at this point, genuinely irreversible.

Aboard, the new crew pleases me on a real, almost synergetic level — I can see real potential building for our near future.

Yves is another remarkable contact — during a dinner aboard a few nights back, his own dreams surfaced. A naval architect, planning eventually to design underwater habitats. Working for major tanker companies gives him serious purchasing power — millions of dollars moving through his hands — so by slipping in a modest request for shackles, rope, paint, we may be able to refit the RVH more thoroughly, and more affordably, than we'd originally hoped.

March 16, 2001

Another complication delaying our departure — the generator's in rough shape, pistons out of alignment, requiring a small trick just to get it started. Manfred has a replacement for sale at a decent price, twenty-nine fifty US dollars; George will come check whether the specifications actually match what we need.

A tense strat session where I play the heavy, cutting off drawn-out debate to keep things moving.

Last night's comments and observations session was a good one, everyone recalling favorite moments from our stay here.

Chapter Eleven

Singapore

March 22, 2001

The city has fully taken over, and the log's grown inconsistent. I can't find the time or discipline to write. It's one in the morning now.

The generator's up and running.

Getting the old one out took pure muscle — a team effort with blocks and tackle, everyone covered in grease by the end, but the job gets done somehow.

Installing the new one, we used chain blocks instead.

Group dynamics have grown genuinely tricky lately, especially since we'd originally planned only a two-week stopover.

The whole generator episode's been a useful exercise in decision-making, though — weighing every option carefully.

I've had some trouble with Claus, who seems intent on undoing progress made before he arrived, trying to reestablish his old, more heavy-handed style. Ferdi's been practically under his thumb, following him around everywhere.

You can't have a decent conversation with him without it drifting toward bars and women eventually. Tiring, after a while.

The science gets constantly mocked too, in a cynical way — not to mention how casually other cultures get dismissed.

So culture, once again, becomes the real study here, with the specimen sitting right here aboard.

The magic's faded a little — we're no longer novel here at the marina. The same routine sets in, the pub every night, the same conversations.

Time to leave, before real damage sets in.

We're a sailing vessel on an expedition. That's what we're here to do — not get drunk every night, coasting on the goodwill earned from the work we're actually doing. We're doers. Time to act again.

March 23, 2001

One day before departure. First time running proper watches to monitor the generator overnight.

It rained for three hours last night, heavy rain, a light breeze from the north, tide coming in.

Only five of us for lab this morning — a missed wake-up call. Need to tighten that up.

Today's about tying up every loose end, finances through to shipshaping.

Couldn't sleep last night, so I worked through the watches, emergency stations, the new route instead.

We need to prepare properly for open water again. I touch up the yellow paint on the ship's eyes — a small gesture, a reminder not to neglect the soul of our companion. She hasn't been to sea in nearly a month; she needs to reacquaint herself with home. Rest, on the outside, though the real journey happens on the inside regardless.

Resistance shows up, gets worked through, or simply passed.

We've become landlubbers again, losing touch with the sea a little. And she doesn't accept bad art from anyone. So today, I think of her specifically. Respect comes first, always, before any real dialogue can happen.

March 24, 2001

The whole crew piles into a minibus, off to George and Melissa's house.

The kids ask immediately whether I'm captain of the pirates. Isabelle, six years old and already diving, keeps the energy up the whole visit.

The food is wonderful, everything grilled to perfection, sauces divine, wine flowing freely. The garden, orchids as far as the eye can see, brings real peace to the place.

Finally I get to talk properly about cooking with Melissa — several of my culinary heroes turn out to be people she knows personally, having tasted their work firsthand.

Back at the marina around 12:30.

A quick beer with Major Tang and friends, and I learn more about the MPOI expedition. The marina staff know all our particular habits by now, including lab and acting class.

I maintain we have nothing to hide — if anything, the air of mystery we sometimes create only draws more curiosity than simply being open about it would.

Wind picks up around 5 a.m., driving rain, gusts to thirty-five knots bending the palm trees. I go to the edge of the marina just to feel the force of it. One boat has to undock entirely, caught on the wrong side of its berth.

Kishor and I make a round of the marina, checking on the boats.

I drift back to sleep once the wind finally settles.

Claus and Ferdi are up too. A quick look exchanged between us says enough, though Claus can never quite leave it there — he always has something more to add. It's not malicious, often a good icebreaker with new people, but I can't always take it in stride, and bite my tongue more than once.

We get the ship shipshape, passports and clearance papers all aboard, one last check around the ship.

I get in the water to inspect and clean the propeller, get properly clean myself in the process. Still waiting on two V-belts for the generator.

We hold our meeting.

Undocking goes smoothly. My heart pounds, though steadily rather than racing — an instant reconnection with the ship. She handles beautifully. We clear the lighthouse and we're off. Claus stays cool, watching without stepping in. I feel completely at one with the Heraclitus in this moment — not just the maneuvering itself, but the crew too. I know how people move, almost what they're thinking.

Mike and Helen film our departure from the dock — genuine friends throughout our stay.

Our whole updated wardrobe traces back to them, generous with shirts and shorts, proper sailor-quality clothing that leaves us looking sharper than before.

On the shelf, a bottle of extra-virgin olive oil from Melissa, and a Tuscan wild boar prosciutto too — a real, rare treat, impossible to find without the right connections.

Last night sparked real inspiration — I'll finally follow through on the original idea for an RVH cookbook.

We navigate through the buoys, tide in our favor, no wind under overcast skies.

Ten miles from the Horsburgh Lighthouse now. A beautiful, satisfying dinner while cargo ships steadily overtake us.

Past the lighthouse, we decide to cross the incoming shipping lane — watching carefully for red running lights, timing our crossing. Claus in charge, several people visibly nervous, clearly unsure exactly what to watch for. But we cross safely, and from here it's a clear run toward Pulau Tioman.

Kind weather all around — the wind even blowing the right direction, though too late now to bother raising sail.

Two bottlenose dolphins ride our bow briefly — a nice sign, they haven't forgotten us.

Orla takes charge of dropping anchor. Dark by now; we approach carefully and by 9:00 we're safely anchored off the pier, five cables out.

Lightning puts on a show along the horizon.

East Coast of Malaysia

March 26, 2001

Waking to the sound of forest and outboard engines, we lower the boat and I go clear the ship in.

We dive at the park station — six Thai fishing boats were sunk here a few years back, and fish are regularly fed along the jetty, drawing crowds of Japanese tourists and divers alike. The fish are so accustomed to people they circle right around us.

On the bottom, various artificial reef structures — old tires, PVC pipe, cement blocks, all colonized now, mostly by decent-sized staghorn coral.

Fish life is genuinely prolific — batfish, rabbitfish, chub, schools of barracuda, jacks, fusiliers.

Below, huge pufferfish, goatfish digging through the sand, gobies and their shrimp partners approachable at incredibly close range.

Within the cement structures, sea urchins, sea cucumbers, and I spot a cuttlefish feeding.

Constant action throughout the dive, though real care's needed around boat traffic — vessels constantly coming and going from the pier, or mooring nearby.

I lead both dives, testing different gear each time — on the second, the strobe for the Nikonos, catching some wide shots of the wrecks and jack schools before the light fades.

A real paradise for beginner underwater photographers, I imagine — rare to get fish this close without any feeding of your own.

Genuinely a living open-ocean aquarium. Though the practice of feeding fish draws criticism from some environmental purists, it clearly serves an educational purpose too, giving people a hands-on experience of marine life they'd otherwise only see through aquarium glass.

Ironic, really — sunken fishing boats now sheltering the very fish they once hunted, our own discarded waste transformed into underwater sculpture.

Sunday dinner under the stars, Orion riding high again.

Water here's exceptionally clear for the region — I remember only three or four meters of visibility on our last visit.

The island keeps its slow pace, its friendly people. We already feel a world away from Singapore.

The crew's happy, and Claus shines here, in my eyes at least — a real reconnection between us.

My own energy lifts from being back underwater, some sense of balance restored, like all the strange wiring absorbed from the land of total globalization finally settling back into place.

I'm not really a back-to-nature type, exactly, though it's in the wild that I find myself most at home — maybe simply an addiction to genuine natural beauty.

Singapore, in its own way, is just as much a monument to human ability — technological progress, at least on its polished front. Dig a little, and you find the usual dirt underneath.

The water around Singapore itself is essentially dead. Even at Raffles, with its conservation gestures — which I suspect function more as political theater and networking than real commitment — sharkfin soup still appears prominently advertised as a house special, even after Gaie and Lazer once brought back posters from that same marina depicting a dead shark tangled in a net.

March 27, 2001

We dive the wreck first, gathering data on staghorn coral growth — measurements on both the pier structure and the wreck itself. Visibility's terrible, under six feet, and the fish show up in far smaller numbers than yesterday.

After lunch, a second wreck close to the ship, resting in a hundred feet — two fishing boats. Inside a pipe, three golden morays peer out; I get a few shots. A big

grouper's taken up residence, a few snapper hiding beneath the bow.

A school of jacks circles us briefly around seventy feet.

For the day's final dive, Rengis Island — we'd dived it on our last visit too. Gray skies threatening rain as we go down. The coral hasn't deteriorated, fish life still good — pufferfish, groupers everywhere, small barracuda, and a cuttlefish entirely unbothered by our presence.

Tuesday night on Malaysia, drifting by the end into religious topics.

March 28, 2001

Early wake-up, 5 a.m., a mix-up with the watches. Wind picks up, rain starts pouring. Orla, Heather, and I take the first ferry to Mersing, on the mainland — a two-and-a-half-hour drive, stopping at every resort jetty along the way.

The outboard's due around 2:00. Meanwhile we handle the bank, the fish and vegetable market, pick up an anchor and a couple of buoys for the small boat. I notice how close Malay is to Indonesian, sharing the same roots — I manage to get vegetables and fruit for half what Heather pays.

A quick stroll past wooden boats docked along the river — kids fishing with chicken guts as bait, pulling decent-sized catfish from the murky water. Good trade for them.

Local seamen handle their boats ruthlessly here, banging into things, cutting sharp maneuvers without much concern.

Loaded to the brim, we reach the ship by speedboat in under ninety minutes — I sleep most of the ride.

Aboard, I reconnect briefly before crashing entirely, waking again around 10 p.m.

March 29, 2001

Up before dawn to move the ship to Pulau Tulai, a sheltered bay.

We lower the beagle, the new thirty-horsepower engine getting its first real run, and dive the north side of Pulau Chebeh that afternoon.

A magical dive, everything present at once — huge boulders draped in multicolored soft coral, white gorgonian fans teeming with fish, feather stars everywhere. A school of huge barracuda hunting at fifty feet, right where cold and warm water meet. Jacks, groupers. Blue-spotted stingrays, easily approached, angelfish, pufferfish. Most striking of all, the sheer number of sea anemones with their clownfish tenants, ranging from yellow through deep blue — already half-closing for the evening. The top fifteen feet bloom with plankton and warm water.

A truly incredible dive.

I give Piers an hour of classroom instruction for his dive course, planning to take him down properly in the morning.

Thursday night, we play "Voices from the Edge," Johnny's old interview recording — talk of Biosphere 2 spinning naturally into broader cultural discussion around the table.

March 30, 2001

The day opens with a good lab session, birds singing, attention fully present. I focus on relaxing every small muscle, emphasizing the breath throughout. Forty-five minutes in, I want more — though the day's questions are already stirring.

I take Piers down for his first open-water dive — he's entirely comfortable. We meet a turtle who simply lets us touch her.

A day full of diving. First, Tiger Rock — huge boulders in twenty meters of water. Visibility's mediocre, though more than made up for by the density of fish tucked into every crevasse. Barracuda, jacks hunting silverfish, yellow snapper shoaling, parrotfish, huge pufferfish, the whole range of local angelfish and butterflyfish. The substrate's thick with sea fans and soft coral of every kind.

A knot and a half of current sweeps the area. I get absorbed with the camera again, this time metering the light properly and filling with strobe — a shame I can't check results underwater, just hoping some of the exposures land right.

A group heads to the famed Magician Rock but comes back less than thrilled, so we dive Chebeh instead that afternoon — the best site in the area, the same wild abundance of fish. I get close to the shallow edge, diving mostly alone — a luxury I try to protect when I can.

Comments and observations that evening bring an odd vision — man lying down, moving through a diagnostic tube for various checkups, alongside the general sickness of a world population raised on chemicals and fast food. I get into a kind of throne theory, how in his strange, almost frantic pursuit of pseudo-equality, man's grown steadily lazier with his own body. Energy increasingly spent on the mind alone, though a mind without a body attached can't function fully, not in certain directions at least.

That evening I hint to Claus that maybe it's wiser to skip our planned trip to Aur — or at least reconsider it.

March 31, 2001

Acting class in the morning — natural voice and resonating chambers first, then small groups, each assigned a song to perform.

I write out every style I can think of on the board — tribal, classical, symphonic, lyric, opera, blues, jazz, bluegrass, country western, trance, reggae, hip-hop, Latin, salsa, techno, funk, disco, punk, rock, sixties musical — then pair each with a sea-related theme.

Piers plays a nasty fish, I play a dreamy fisherman. Claus, Ferdi, and Orla weave phrases straight from our own shipboard vocabulary into a lion-themed piece with Brenda singing; Susie, Heather, and Aram put on a funny opera-style bit, Susie playing "yes" and "no" themselves.

A dive back at Tiger Rock in the early afternoon.

A short strat session after acting class to settle our plans. After some back-and-forth and a bit of mild disagreement, we decide to head to the other side of Tioman instead, and pick up Inge on the fourth.

Late afternoon, Susie, Heather, Orla, and I scout the Tulai area for a potential science site — nothing promising. We stop to talk with some fishermen instead; my broken Malay gets us by. Weathered faces, carved by decades at sea. I take a few photos. The sky's gorgeous, the whole scene worth savoring. They've come from an island further south, setting nets here overnight — I never quite figure out exactly what they're hoping to catch. We wave goodbye.

I cook dinner — flounder brought from Mersing, snow peas, risotto.

April 2, 2001

The ship's anchored in Juara Bay, on Tioman's east coast. The sea here is thin now — I remember fish jumping constantly during our last visit; tonight, nothing.

The hills still hold real beauty, the trees still standing tall.

Everyone who's stepped into the jungle keeps talking about it afterward — easy to see why. We spend so much of our time either behind concrete walls, or perpetually atop the water's surface — even at sea, we're really just at the boundary, air meeting water.

Once inside a jungle, though, life simply overwhelms you. There's no escaping the pressure of organic life pressing in from every side; it hits with genuine force.

Life here is loud — wind through leaves, insects, monkeys, squirrels, lizards rustling through dry leaf litter, birdsong. And color, green upon green, the color of life itself.

Bats wait out the daylight hanging from the highest coconut fronds. Most of the palms wear metal collars around their trunks, protection against monitor lizards and other fruit thieves.

Juara itself feels like a dead town — guesthouse after guesthouse built, a new jetty in place, but no tourists to speak of. Fishing nets left rotting on the beach. Kids glued to cartoons on TV, though there aren't many kids left here at all.

The place leaves an uneasy feeling in me I can't quite rationalize or trace to any single cause. Something simply feels off.

I sleep a lot, spend time cooking fish, enjoying the process — the blade moving cleanly through skin and

scale. Fusiliers have a wonderful texture, though we rarely bother cleaning them ourselves, too lazy usually, and few people really know the proper technique. Brenda tells me she'd cleaned fish for dinner once, though what I actually see is barely thirty percent of the usable meat left on the bone — a real waste.

A team heads out to a river, hits some rough swells, and Aram goes overboard along with his camera and video gear — an expensive mishap for him. They come back with a genuine adrenaline story, and it's a reminder, watching them, that they're still kids in some ways.

The horsemen of the apocalypse keep riding, ever faster it seems.

You can't really stop them at this point — the real question is how to slow them, even slightly.

Always the race, racing against time — or is time racing us instead?

April 3, 2001

Up before dawn, jungle sounds echoing across the bay. The crew slowly wakes. We raise anchor and get underway, hoisting the beagle just as the sun clears the horizon, racing toward Bahara Rock, an outcrop rising alone in open water. We anchor near a small lighthouse.

And then the magic begins. One of the best dives of my life. Rich, luxurious color, and more fish than I've ever witnessed in one place — the surface itself nearly obscured by shoals of fry, almost blocking the light.

We each dive it twice.

Walls draped in soft coral, huge sea fans. In places, staghorn covers a hundred percent of the substrate. A green turtle rests nearby.

Small golden morays peer from their holes. Angelfish everywhere, curious batfish approaching to inspect the intruders. A few barracuda hover at the edge of deeper water; a lone mackerel passes; schools of jacks patrol the reef.

On the sand, blue-spotted stingrays and caesio thread through a maze of cauliflower soft coral thick as my own leg, over a meter tall. Fields of long whip coral stretch out beyond them.

Another turtle passes.

Pufferfish everywhere too, current sweeping through it all. An overwhelming sense of abundance — the ocean fully alive, more concentrated with life than I'd have imagined possible.

A few crown-of-thorns have bleached some table coral, and there's visible damage from old anchors and nets, but life's reclaimed most of it remarkably fast. Clouds of anthias practically block the light near the surface.

Jacks hunting the fry.

Huge stretches of sea anemone, not nearly enough clownfish to fill them all — every variety represented, some already closing for the night, showing off their bright blue undersides.

I immediately think of IMAX — the only format that could really do justice to this place, action unfolding across a full 360 degrees. A must-see spot. Worth reaching out to James and Jean-Michel — easy access from Singapore, and a genuinely magical location.

Enough for now — we're anchored at Tekek, 9:00 p.m.

April 4, 2001

Finances, communications, crew lists — the day starts buried in paperwork, catching up on everything overdue.

I collect Inge from the airport and grab a quick bite at a local shop.

That afternoon, a meeting with Inge, morning strat, and organizing diesel for the coming days.

We dive Rengis for Piers's third certification dive. He can't descend properly — not enough weight — so I take a solo half-hour exploring instead, discovering what feels like the perfect science site: a reef that's recovered remarkably fast over just two years, three healthy blacktips, docile turtles, fish everywhere.

Dinner conversation turns to Islam, a heated but genuinely engaged discussion around religion.

April 5, 2001

Rengis again at midday, another dive for Piers, and Inge's first dive in years alongside him. Both feel comfortable, and we work through a few underwater exercises together. The light is extraordinary, and we see everything — sharks, blacktips, two turtles, a blue-spotted ray, pristine reef thick with anthias, huge pufferfish, angelfish, groupers, titan triggerfish, mackerel, jacks, clownfish, hogfish dislocating their jaws to feed. The light alone is enough to pull me back for the afternoon dive too, just to film it properly.

A genuinely perfect site to linger over — everything you'd want present at once: great coral, ideal location, thriving fish population.

April 6, 2001

Early rise again, catching the ferry to Mersing. A wet night, though calm, no wind.

After breakfast squeezed in between bank-teller queues, I head straight for the market.

A quick pass through the fish stalls to check the freshest catch — I come away with squid, crab, a grouper, tuna, a kilo of shrimp.

I visit the "chicken lady" for nine birds, and she throws in ice besides. Malay hospitality, genuinely instructive.

Vegetables too, along with anything I haven't tried before. I find tempeh in a more traditional corner, eggs preserved in ash and earth, some unfamiliar spice blend.

Lotus flowers, chili paste, fresh soybean sprouts, mangoes.

Little time left to catch the speedboat leaving around noon — the regular ferries can't run, tide too low, exposing the mudflats, boats waiting at anchor to come in.

We stop at Rawa to collect more passengers — jellyfish swarming the shallows everywhere. I learn only later that they sting; my face ends up covered in a rash.

The shallows here run clear, coral looking healthy in most spots — blast fishing's stopped over the last five or six years, and it shows. Given the chance to simply stand alone for a while, a reef clearly recovers.

April 7, 2001

Acting class — warm-up first, then I introduce the idea of sacred space.

We're here to learn to act, not to remain slaves to our own reactions — or at minimum, to simply notice the reaction when it happens.

Breakdown exercises, stretches, molding. We pair off, sculpting each other, then arrange into tableaux, open the stage for improvisation, and finish with an open circle for discussion.

Overall a good session, opening up real possibilities.

We dive the wreck near the ship — batfish, a spade-shaped school of silverfish, hovering out into the blue, visibility poor around the wreck itself. Jellyfish everywhere too, leaving my face freshly rashed once we surface.

Claus and Ferdi head off to Magician Rock — a lot of resources for uncertain payoff, but Claus is set on going regardless. Rather than manufacture unnecessary conflict, I let them go. Orla tends the boat; rain pours the whole time.

The diesel delivery arrives. Everyone pitches in — halyards, blocks, bodies all in motion.

We know now we'll depart tomorrow.

April 8, 2001

Claus leaves on the first ferry.

I clear us out and send the last messages.

We raise anchor around 11:30 — the usual departure routine, meeting, emergency stations, watch assignments announced.

We head for Magician Rock, weather perfect, though we struggle to locate the marker buoy. I ask a passing fisherman — always the best source of local knowledge.

The dive is majestic — a seamount rising to thirty feet, greeted by a school of barracuda and a huge Napoleon wrasse that's apparently evaded local fishermen for years now. Coral coverage is wild, huge porites heads throughout. Without the fierce current sweeping the area, it would make a wonderful coring site — years of data sitting right there.

Rays tucked under ledges. Every kind of fish present — rainbow runners making passes above the rocks, angelfish, pufferfish, butterflyfish.

Breathtaking landscape.

Plenty of abandoned netting still tangled across the reef — though technically within national park boundaries, enforcement seems minimal, fishing boats still working the area freely.

All along this coast, the seabed shows clear signs of trawling. Evident too at the Mersing fish market, where plenty of bottom-dwelling species, rays especially, fill the stalls.

We raise the boat, then the mainsail, under a setting sun — full moon tonight. I push Sunday-night speeches to tomorrow instead.

Flat sea, light breeze, barely enough to fill a sail, so we motor at idle, aiming for a shoal thirty miles out by morning.

Should prove genuinely valuable — largely unvisited by tourist boats or dive operators. Comparing similar reef areas under different stress levels offers real insight, not just into how a reef reacts to damage, but how, and whether, it recovers.

A recently blasted area often looks deceptively pretty at first glance — soft coral recolonizing quickly, fast-growing staghorn showing early signs of life. But many species never really return; the competition down there

is fierce. Coral isn't the peaceful, inanimate rock it appears to be — genuine territorial warfare plays out constantly, different species wielding different weapons. Usually whoever builds fastest wins, though a tenacious competitor holding even a tiny foothold will extend poisonous tentacles to defend it, expanding millimeter by millimeter.

Fish populations typically bounce back fast, and once the small fish return, predators soon follow.

Once again, though, we've barely seen any sharks — the one exception being Rengis, where three healthy blacktips remain, largely because the island sits right in front of the Berjaya resort, where policy's actually enforced. Everywhere else, the sharks are simply long gone.

Now, 4 a.m., the sea's lit not just by moonlight but by fishing trawlers dotting the horizon in every direction.

[April 9, 2001](#)

The sea picked up overnight, rain falling for hours. In the morning, after lowering sail, I cancel our planned dive on a nearby shoal — too rough to send divers into open water without any fixed reference point. We push on instead. A long night, boats and wind everywhere.

Dolphins — once again riding the bow, long enough that I take it as invitation and join them, hanging from the bobstay chain. Several babies among them, at least four, and two clearly amorous adults engaged in their own business.

I film some footage from above, having spent a while simply staring out at the flat, mirror-still sea, clouds reflected, mind drifting along with them.

Sunday-night dinner, held on a Monday instead. Orla and I cook shrimp, tempeh, a Chinese mushroom stew.

For the evening's skit, I play a veteran explorer, formally presenting the nine-month program certificates I've been carrying around for Ferdi, Maik, and Brenda.

Rain returns overnight. I finish a trashy adventure novel, thoroughly enjoying every page of its underwater, Bond-style action.

April 10, 2001

The sea's dotted with fishing buoys; the ship threads through them like a slalom course.

Spinner dolphins sighted twice — noticeably small, same as I remember from an earlier trip to Thailand, likely a local variant.

Fishing boats everywhere, many trawling — I count fifteen at one point.

We arrive at Tenggol, greeted by a pod of dolphins. Small boat lowered, Ferdi heading toward the bay, radioing back that we can't anchor here. I ask to speak with whoever gave him that information — a French-accented voice, likely Swiss, not especially friendly, claiming coral covers the whole area.

We drop anchor two cables offshore instead.

Maik and I dive the anchor, a hundred and seventy feet down — sandy bottom, no obstructions anywhere, anchor well set. Jellyfish everywhere; I still feel the sting on my lip from earlier.

We decompress at thirty feet for a minute, then fifteen feet for six, clearing a bit of fishing line tangled on the prop along the way.

I make it ashore at Tenggol, stopping by a fishing boat moored in the bay. With my patchy Indonesian, we manage a conversation.

"Ada ikan? Saya mau beli." — Any fish? I'd like to buy some.

I climb aboard. They open a hold, refrigerated with coils reminding me of our own jury-rigged freezer back in Coron.

They've just started their run, though the hold already holds several rays — shovelnose, blue-spotted stingray — a few snapper-type fish, and at least eight hammerhead sharks. Knowing hammerheads feed heavily on rays, I assume they've been bottom-trawling. I pick out a few rays, a mullet, some snapper.

I ask what I owe them. They refuse payment entirely.

The boat's rigged with radio, running four- or five-day trips. I photograph them mending nets — sharks always fight back, and even in defeat usually manage to tear the netting on the way out.

The island holds a single, very laid-back resort. Maik and Brenda ask around about transport for tomorrow — they're leaving the ship here.

At sunset, swallows play around the ship, darting inches from my face at full speed, seven of them eventually settling on the bobstay pipe while I sit on the bow.

The jungle's loud with insect noise — a real delight.

Talk turns to industrial fishing trawlers worldwide, and a bit of back-and-forth on environmental extremism during an evening focused on fishing generally. I get a little preachy again, genuinely passionate about it by the end.

The moon rises over the trees, and our seven swallow guests on the bobstay finally settle in for the night.

April 11, 2001

I run lab in the morning. During the meeting afterward, Maik holds an "auction box," clearing out an impressive personal stash he's accumulated aboard — including, somehow, powdered milk.

We dive that morning, though the strong current wears us out fast, and we don't see much for the effort — a slightly frustrating dive, though good exercise regardless.

A police boat gets its anchor snagged on a wreck, a hundred and sixty feet down. I offer help, though they manage to yank it free themselves and head off.

In the trees, two white-bellied sea eagles watch majestically from above; through binoculars I spot what might be two monkeys in the branches. Birdsong constant throughout.

After lunch, another dive, more successful this time — a huge moray I spend a while annoying with the camera, thicker than two of my legs together, close to two meters long. Tuna cruise at thirty feet, fat mullet passing by, and, silhouetted against the sun, a graceful eagle ray gliding through.

Thick schools of fusiliers feeding on incoming plankton; colonies of tiny jellyfish gathering at the surface.

Purple sea fans and feather stars everywhere, though somehow lacking the vibrancy of Chebeh or Bahara Rock. Still, anything seems possible on this dive — curious jacks come to inspect us, sea cucumbers and stars on the sand, a few stingrays, huge needlefish hunting near the surface, trumpetfish, angelfish, filefish, pufferfish, wrasse, all present.

A great dive overall.

Thursday night we read an old interview with Annie Sprinkle — genuinely rare material for discussion, and it makes for an interesting conversation around the table.

April 12, 2001

A small-boat expedition out. We drop into heavy current around submerged boulders, sheltering first against a large rock to escape the full force of it. The rocks most exposed carry multicolored soft coral, ranging from reds and pinks through greens and creamy white. Fish hover above, feeding.

Batfish, juveniles included, rest in calmer water nearby. Under crevasses, big groupers, pufferfish, angelfish dart away as we pass. The sweeping current mixes with warm water, blurring everything slightly out of focus. Fusiliers gather along the current's edge, forming something like a river running through open water.

Huge coral formations throughout; visibility over twenty to twenty-five meters makes the whole dive even more spectacular.

Second dive, anchored in a nearby bay — rocks here draped in leathery soft coral. We spot a scorpionfish, masterfully camouflaged, holding perfectly still except for its eyes tracking the camera lens. Two turtles pass by; a bumphead grazes on shallow coral, a huge mullet circling the bay.

Late afternoon, I go ashore for a short trek — tall trees, mosquitoes starting to bite at arms, legs, ears, butterflies everywhere.

I share jackfruit with a local man, retired from government work, now building a few huts.

Lizards and fruit bats hang from the tallest trees; an eagle circles over the island's peak. Monkeys somewhere nearby, though I fail to spot any.

Piers arrives for pickup; we watch a sandpiper on a rock as the sun sets.

That evening the wind picks up, and something in me won't quite let my mind rest — I keep checking radar, setting two clothespins as a visual drag reference so I can simply glance from my bunk and check our status without fully waking.

April 13, 2001

I wake up genuinely unwell, unable to function properly. Everyone assumes dehydration. I lie down in Nemo's, dreaming heavily, sleeping the entire day, surfacing only for dinner — an inner journey through dreams, surfacing old blocks and resistance, both maddening and, somehow, wonderful.

Rain most of the day. I trust the crew to monitor the ship on their own. Though we're heading toward dry dock in the coming months, she's still dry inside, no leaks. Wind picks up, and I finally poke my head above the Nemo's hatch — plenty of people on deck already. A dive team's out; I hope, somewhere in the back of my mind, they took a proper bearing before going.

Everyone seems relaxed enough, though I sense they don't fully appreciate how capricious the sea can turn when the mood strikes her.

April 14, 2001

After twenty glasses of water and twenty hours of sleep across the last day, I finally surface from a genuinely strange stretch — dreams carrying me all over the place.

After a meeting, a dive — swells crashing against the rocks push us toward a more sheltered spot instead.

A beautiful dive, a gentle one-knot current. Coral's healthy between fifteen and thirty feet, a plateau settling

around thirty-five to fifty. A bumphead parrotfish, a hawksbill turtle, and two whitetip sharks I end up chasing a while just to get a decent shot. Parrotfish grazing everywhere, and I count at least eight crown-of-thorns, leaving their trail of destruction behind them.

Malaysian reefs have long suffered from crown-of-thorns outbreaks, apparently.

Giant table corals, porites, staghorn all finding small sheltered pockets to thrive in, to the delight of at least nine species of butterflyfish grazing on the polyps.

A few juvenile barracuda hovering at fifty feet, jacks passing through, fusiliers raining down the reef face. The usual clownfish and anemone still manage to thrill me, even after all these dives.

Orla and Piers spot a green moray.

Always an eye kept toward the surface, watching for passing shadows.

The sea crashes against the rocks, foam and that particular turquoise that only appears when the water's genuinely churning.

Aboard, we wait on Sam's arrival, expected today or tomorrow.

Late afternoon, Orla, Aram, and I head to a beach on the island's south side.

Jungle comes right down to the sand. Ants everywhere, eager to bite. Tall trees, vines twisting down in loops, a few birds moving branch to branch, butterflies flickering through the air constantly. I film some hermit crabs along the tideline.

More fish encountered — investigating a nearby fishing boat, we realize it's the same crew who offered us fish days ago, now on their fifth day at sea, mending nets, three more days still to go.

I film them, and once again they offer fish freely. I try insisting on payment; they refuse. We smoke together while they work, their hands moving in perfect, practiced gestures, silhouetted against the low sun.

Sunset by the time we head back, three kilos of squid and six or seven kilos of snapper-type fish in hand. I start filleting straight away.

Wind shifts from the south, requiring real vigilance on the anchor — we'd drift toward shore now if it dragged. Won't help my sleep tonight.

April 15, 2001

Acting class in the morning — everyone drawing everyone else into their own particular method of reaching an altered state: shaking, spinning, whirling, breathwork, molding. We move into an emotional sequence built around gluttony, an open stage with a magical "if" — a lavish buffet laid out before us.

Pours rain the whole time. Wind's shifted again — clearly a real transition underway, now blowing from the northwest.

Cleanup, waiting for the sky to clear. Sam's still not here; she'll arrive tomorrow, word coming through the mainland ferry.

Two dives that afternoon. Piers, Inge, Orla, and I head to the southern rock — a great dive, dropping to a hundred feet to watch a resting turtle on the sand. Fusiliers and caesio swim above scattered boulders.

On the current-facing side, soft coral flourishes, fish alongside it. A moray hides beneath staghorn coral; bumphead parrotfish scars mark the reef everywhere. Sweetlips, groupers, batfish, angelfish drift past. We fall into a trance near the point where waves break against the rock.

Sunday dinner under the stars.

The usual speeches surface old memories, though tonight I focus instead on the particular, deliberate pace at which the Heraclitus moves — perhaps the most effective pace, honestly, for real information-gathering, giving an individual enough time to properly absorb and reflect on what they're observing.

April 16, 2001

Getting the ship ready to depart. I spend an hour whipping rope ends — can't stand seeing them left frayed. The ship looks good, everyone busy this morning. We fill every air bottle, hoping for a dive along the way.

Small boat raised, departure meeting held.

Sam arrives, radiant, full of outside news.

We raise anchor — tricky given the strong current pushing us, so the moment the anchor breaks free, we're already moving.

Ferdi's been working on the shaft's stuffing box; it isn't dripping at all now, which turns out to be its own small problem — Aram and Ferdi spend time in the engine room sorting it out properly.

Lazer's sent along a thicker wetsuit with Sam, meaning I can extend my own dive times going forward.

Plenty of news on the science front, and word of friends scattered across the planet.

A bottle of wine from Xtine, for an evening under the stars.

I cook dinner — squid from the fishermen. We arrange cushions on deck and hear Sam's full report — she'd met many people connected to the RV Heraclitus along the way, former crew members now settled in Mexico,

several back in school pursuing degrees or continuing research on data we've been collecting all this time.

More than ever, I feel the real weight of what we're doing here — a flag raised, calling out to the world: please, do something.

The mood's excellent aboard tonight, mellow, notably more grown-up somehow.

Sifting through the news Sam's brought back, my mind fills instantly with satellites, conferences, a picture of activity back at the ranch.

It strikes me how different life really is out here on the water.

To start, we live constantly at the mercy of the elements, tracking the biosphere's own moods, unable and unwilling to hide from them. Weather, and the Heraclitus herself, call most of the shots, in real time.

Someone, right now, steers the ship, holding her carefully on course.

"The more you swing off course, the more you lose — time, resources, energy. Stay the course," I hear myself say.

Sixty miles left to Redang Island.

Wind's out of the north, telling us the monsoon transition hasn't fully settled yet — the southerlies running late. For us, that means motoring against both wind and current. At 1200 RPM, we barely manage three knots.

The deck watch keeps sharp eyes at the edge of visibility, alert for obstructions — fishing buoys scattered everywhere through these waters. A line caught in the prop right now would be a genuine disaster.

Through Nemo's porthole, stars still visible, no clouds yet. Old friends up there, even if only through invented myth and pattern, revealing themselves. Scorpio's out tonight, so Orion's taken a break — ever since their old quarrel, the sky gods have kept the two apart.

Can't sleep. I pace the deck, catching any triggers the deck checks might have missed.

In the command room, I monitor our course, study the charts — the luxury of time and quiet reflection.

April 17, 2001

"Drop the anchor!" "One hundred feet — hard!"

Meanwhile Aram, on radar, calls out our distance to Pulau Yu Kecil astern.

9 a.m., the sea a perfect mirror, reflecting the clouds. Jellyfish blur the water's depth.

"Boat team on deck!" Everyone takes position while whoever's in charge calls the shots. "Haul away!" Muscles tense, pulling on the halyard line — gravity briefly defied as the small boat lowers.

The team works cleanly, without unnecessary chatter. I watch quietly, coffee in hand. Small rain squalls passed over during the night, sleeping in the command room, part of my brain staying alert the whole time.

First divers gear up. This site appears in none of the local dive literature — a genuine exploration dive, too remote for standard operators, no liveaboards ever passing through.

We're lucky with the weather.

I clean the Nikonos, switch to a close-up lens.

The ship never really sleeps — always someone up, watching the wind, contemplating the stars, or simply

sulking over something. The galley churns out food in real volume; there's no rest from that particular need.

"Put real effort into the food — it's the one thing we can't avoid doing anyway, so we might as well do it properly."

Food's genuinely become one of our real successes aboard. We eat well — fresh fish, vegetables, farm chicken. Simple, healthy fare. Given our activity level, illness stays rare, our medical kit barely touched, most of the supplies slowly expiring, unused. Better that way.

The dive itself covers boulder terrain with good hard coral coverage, though crown-of-thorns are present throughout, a fair percentage of the coral bleached in their wake.

Fish life is good — shoals of yellow snapper, bumphead parrotfish, angelfish, fusiliers, huge pufferfish, stingrays in the sand, a good variety of sea cucumber. Soft coral more limited here.

We head for Redang, anchor up, sun beating down on us.

Orla takes charge of dropping anchor. We reach four cables off Redang's main island by 5:15.

I take the small boat out, mostly just to avoid being aboard while the anchor's actually going down.

Piers and I race to what's supposedly a village in the bay.

The village no longer exists — everyone relocated inland long ago. About fifteen fishing boats sit anchored near the jetty. My few words of Malay break the ice quickly enough.

A man points to a motorbike, gesturing for me to take it.

So I ride, in a small convoy, to the end of the road, to the resort — hoping simply to find a store selling vegetables. We reach the island's one and only shop, near the relocated village. Every house looks identical; I can't

help wondering how people here felt about the move, now cut off from the sea they'd always lived beside.

I buy carrots, soybeans, eggs, watermelon, cucumber, a few bottles of Coke, cigarettes.

Now, transporting it all back becomes the real challenge. A man helps rig a system of plastic ties for the biggest box; I balance the rest across my lap and set off, everyone watching like I'm some kind of wild man, packed to the limit for the three- or four-mile ride back to the jetty.

Back aboard, Tuesday-night theater nearly falls apart entirely, with almost nothing coming from anyone. Rather than push against a wall, I simply ask everyone where they'd rather be right now, no constraint of time, space, or money — three rounds later, we've uncovered some genuine insight into a few people's inner worlds.

I set up the cameras and discover my Nikon's stopped working entirely. A brand-new camera, no less. I dig out the warranty — I'll take it to a dealer in London.

April 18, 2001

We leave around 7:00 to catch the ferry to Terengganu, entering the Sungai Terengganu within two hours at low tide — barely a meter and a half of depth. The Heraclitus herself could never make it into this harbor.

The ferry manager greets us, offering to run us over to the port authorities.

While waiting, we watch local fishermen applying fresh antifouling paint, taking advantage of the low tide as a makeshift dry dock — the rising tide will lift them free again soon enough.

At the port authority office, unlike Tioman, I face plenty of questions. "But you'll need customs too." I realize each Malaysian state operates with its own real

autonomy, each with its own sultan, the sultans rotating a shared kingship among themselves annually — a genuinely novel concept, democratic royalty of a sort.

After nearly an hour and paid port fees, we head for customs.

It nearly turns comic when they ask for a cargo manifest — a form they're supposed to provide themselves. They disappear, returning with an old form from a previous vessel, debating quietly how to erase the prior data cleanly. They eventually settle on correction fluid. Meanwhile the chief greets me warmly, like an old friend, much to our official escort's visible surprise.

We chat about football, the Eiffel Tower, and eventually, with a loud laugh, he declares, "I like French football, French food, and French girls too" — formalities suddenly moving much faster after that.

On the way to the money changer, our helpful escort shares a wild story — an African man once tried buying one of the ferries, arriving with what he claimed was a million dollars in cash, all of it forged, printed on black paper requiring special chemical treatment to reveal. Somewhere out there, apparently, a man still wanders with a suitcase of fake million-dollar bills, looking for someone to take them.

We cross the bridge to Duyong Island — "duyong" being Malay for mermaid.

Awi's guesthouse — stilt houses built entirely from organic materials, real artistic flair throughout. No restaurant, but we share tea with Awi himself, master boatbuilder, his ancestors Cham people from Vietnam, running a small shipyard building traditional wooden boats.

True master craftsmen, shaping remarkably smooth, watertight hulls, sealed using tree bark. Not seafarers themselves, though, and the whole tradition of sailing

craft is fading fast here. Christine, we learn, has had five boats built by Awi, all junk-rigged.

Modern power tools and stainless bolts now reinforce the main structure, but the craftsmanship itself remains extraordinary — I can't help running my hand along the smooth curve of a hull.

Awi's brother works the cargo run supplying Redang, and shows me a beautifully carved wooden pulley block — no longer in common use. It strikes me suddenly how much of this old craft we're still quietly keeping alive aboard the Heraclitus.

We visit Christine and end up talking for well over two hours, ranging across everything — spirals, art, boats. She once sailed to Vietnam without an engine, before GPS existed, two of her eight children aboard. Art runs through her whole life — writing, painting, thinking, studying history. She would have gotten along wonderfully with Johnny. Like most French speakers, she loves conversation; out of courtesy to Orla, we mostly speak English, aside from a handful of words that simply resist translation.

She once taught at the Sorbonne, one of France's most prestigious institutions, before, as she puts it, deliberately setting aside the purely intellectual life for something more organic, tied to the sea.

We talk about a local Sufi order here in Terengganu, keeping Islam's esoteric traditions alive, though without the whirling practiced elsewhere.

We'll eat later, on Nasruddin Road.

Duyong, island of mermaids — memories surface unbidden. Mermaids have followed me around, in a way, for years now — a mermaid painter in Miami, a striking woman who first pointed me toward the Heraclitus crew the night they dined at a nearby restaurant. Mitox in Sulawesi, offering me "mermaid's tears" in a tiny flask,

instructions to dab a few drops on my forehead whenever things turned difficult — I've used them twice, and, whether through psychology or simple poetry, believe they helped both times. In PNG, a woman who looked into my eyes and told me to greet the lady of the moon and her twelve stars, then described her own mermaid sightings around the Duke of York Islands. In the Solomons, similar stories, plenty of witnesses. Warren's boat carries a gorgeous mermaid figure on her bow; I've photographed a mermaid statue at Raffles too. And all the children along the way — Pandora in Africa, George and Melissa's daughter.

We decide to visit the museum before looking at more boats — the local ferry, steered by an old man, helmsman being an actual profession here, steering rigged through pulleys and rope, the throttle its own clever rope-and-pulley contraption connected to the engine. We stop briefly to refuel.

We pass beneath the bridge, thick with fishing traps, cruising along the Sungai River, tracing the old route of the Chinese admiral Zheng He, said to have come to Terengganu once on a mission against a rival, one of his ships stranded in this very river while he continued on to Mecca and his fleet eventually reached as far as Madagascar — the fifteenth century, unfolding around us.

The museum closes within the hour; an impressive building, heavily funded by the sultan, particularly once oil was discovered in the province.

The marine exhibit displays two traditional boats — not entirely traditional, fitted with metal pulleys, but otherwise intact, giving a real sense of the style and shape of life aboard them.

Construction techniques are described inside, Malay only, alongside models of junks and other traditional vessels.

Another exhibit covers traditional fishing techniques, various traps and lures on display. Outside, I'm drawn to a bark canoe, hand-sewn with bamboo strips — possibly among the earliest boat designs, evolving gradually toward the more elaborate carved hulls beyond it.

Time runs out, and we catch a bus to the station, sending a quick message home in under ten minutes before a taxi back to the village. I film children playing in the water, wood drying everywhere — needing eight months before it's usable, already cut tongue-and-groove, and it strikes me it would be perfect for our Synesthesia floor. Three thousand ringgit a ton, roughly eight hundred US dollars.

Prices have climbed steeply — Malaysia's notorious for having logged most of its pristine rainforest already. Peninsular Malaysia retains some virgin forest still, but in Borneo the clearing continues unabated, most of the timber shipped west.

Christine built her own boat thirty years ago for thirty thousand ringgit, under nine thousand dollars at the time.

A child plays nearby with a model boat.

Peace along the river, the sound of prayer drifting from a nearby mosque.

I get a quick massage at the guesthouse — a man spontaneously decides my back needs serious attention, working his fingers deep into the muscle. Why, exactly, I couldn't say — maybe he simply noticed how arched my back had become. It does genuine good regardless; all the built-up tension in my shoulders finally releases.

We try catching a bus into town to eat — haven't eaten all day. It never arrives, ninety minutes of waiting, though not entirely wasted — I fall into something close to lab, nearly matching the stillness of an old man seated

nearby, cross-legged, not moving a fraction of an inch the entire time.

Then three taxis pull up unexpectedly, and we climb aboard alongside him.

We reach a restaurant and feast on giant prawns, squid, beef bone soup, tom yum, starfruit juice.

A wonderful scene — whole families out eating together. I connect easily with a few of the children there.

Back at the guesthouse, I read a few pages from a French adventure sailor's memoir, share a tender moment with Orla by the water's edge. Stars out, and surprisingly, almost no mosquitoes.

A drunk expat waters the guesthouse plants nearby, calling himself a "piss artist," claiming an allergy to anything from the sea — an odd choice of village to settle in, given the surroundings.

April 19, 2001

Early rise at dawn for a walk through the kampung — Muslims here always up well before sunrise, for the first prayer of the day.

The drying wood glows beautifully in early light. We share roti and coffee with the boatbuilders.

A quick chat with Christine, who's just finished a watercolor portrait — more boat talk, more photographs shared.

Many boats here sit unfinished, funding having run dry — one particular hull's stood untouched for ten years now, technically still belonging to its original, long-vanished investor. There ought to be some law, really, allowing someone else to pick up an abandoned dream after enough time's passed, rather than starting entirely from scratch. So many boats left to slowly rot, never

fulfilling their purpose, many destined never to touch water at all — while real sea lovers, lacking the resources, simply wait in silence nearby.

We take a ferry to the market — genuinely alive, not just with people but with culture itself. Right at the entrance, vendors of "magic" tonics wait for customers — massage oils made from seahorse, eel, who knows what else, pills for every ailment imaginable, herbal potions of every kind.

The fish here are excellent quality — grouper, snapper, tuna, emperor fish, squid, shrimp, rays.

I film all of it — men cleaning fish, mounds of squid, money changing hands.

Fruit and vegetables of every kind; anything unfamiliar, I sample or simply buy a piece of. Obscure fruits, fresh tamarind, mango, durian, shredded beef, special green chili, Chinese turnip.

With an old woman at one stall, I share a smoke of local tobacco — "strong," she manages, unable to say much more, though our eyes meet and she laughs.

I buy a few scented flowers to honor the Heraclitus, planning to lay them on the bow.

Every kind of fish gets dried here — huge swordfish heads, big jacks down to the tiniest fry, mackerel, squid, prawns.

The spice section overwhelms the senses — chili in every form imaginable, cloves, nutmeg, spiced shredded beef, shrimp paste, and other blends I couldn't begin to name.

The batik work here is extraordinary — some woven cloth in the shops runs to three thousand ringgit, mostly reserved for ceremonial use.

Thinking ahead to the boobies that keep fouling our deck, I buy a slingshot fashioned from bull horn, hoping

to fend them off — a real bargain at three ringgit, under a dollar, the horn material itself cleverly recycled.

April 20, 2001

Sam, Heather, and Susie return from their turtle expedition, having watched one lay eggs. Oddly, they share almost none of the details afterward, and when I ask Heather whether the rest of the crew might get a turn at some point, she doesn't even know — they'd never thought to ask.

On a dive, the reef proves superb — fields of staghorn, table coral, more staghorn again, porites, brain coral throughout.

In the shallows, jacks of every size hunt through clouds of fry, grazing steadily, darting whenever the mood strikes.

Above, a line of some twenty needlefish hang in slow motion, waiting for an opening.

A blacktip cruises past. A huge shoal of yellow-striped snapper parts to let us through.

Sweetlips schooling nearby. Three huge bumphead parrotfish take bites out of the reef — interestingly, they often seem to target what looks like dead skeleton rather than living coral, and smaller parrotfish nearby imitate them, biting the exact same spots.

Every anemone hosts its own clownfish family. Fusiliers rain down steadily. Current running around a knot.

On a large black snapper, a parasite clings stubbornly near its eye.

Soft coral scattered everywhere, though on the smaller side here. In the crevasses, sweepers hide out the daylight hours.

Orla spots two huge grouper. We keep working up and down the reef, swimming back against the current to find ourselves suddenly surrounded by the fry school, jacks darting in and out around us.

Fields of staghorn rise like a hillside on the landward side of Pulau Pinang.

To the Ship

Heraclitus, you keep giving and giving. You keep demanding, too, though only, I think, to keep our own souls from stagnating.

With your eyes painted on the bow, watching the sea ahead, you never miss a beat.

Different cultures — Sri Lanka, Bali, Vietnam, Cambodia — have all painted eyes on their boats to ward off evil spirits. I believe the ship truly sees through hers.

The Heraclitus can never really serve as a model for others, because she's genuinely one of a kind — a living work of art that would simply cease to exist the day she's left without the souls of sailors, artists, scientists, dreamers, and doers aboard her. Without people, in other words.

She's succeeded on many fronts, but the most important, to my mind, has been keeping a real sea culture alive — not just sailing here and there, but a full, rich culture of seafaring, the richest I've personally encountered in any tribe or community. I say "full" deliberately, because human growth and evolution sit right at the heart of what this ship represents. The road less traveled, no exaggeration needed — real adventure, inward and outward both.

The sea tolerates no bad art. The Heraclitus's own art lives entirely through the people who bring her to life.

She's just cement, a few tools, canvas, raw material, in the end. Except she isn't, not really — she's something close to a complete living system, as every real boat is, in its own way.

Trial and error, sweat, plenty of it, energy poured in by so many wonderful people, all in service of a dream a handful of us carry.

The sea asks for everything you have, and only then does she give back. Capricious and demanding at times, yes, but we've been riding her mercy this whole way, kept safe within that particular window of space and time that keeps us all alive. There are ways to read her, and she offers herself up in return. When I speak of "the sea," I mean, of course, the whole synergetic phenomenon of the biosphere itself.

When the ship's own painted eyes can't see, we're down there ourselves, reporting back whatever we find.

Addicted to the sea — aquamaniacs, oceanauts, call us what you like.

For two years now we've kept an eye out for sails on the horizon — not the high-tech sails of modern racing craft, but traditional canvas. Hardly anyone still relies on wind alone anymore. The industrial revolution quietly killed that particular art too.

[April 21, 2001](#)

I drop Aram and Ferdi at the ferry. Choppy sea, most local fishing boats staying at anchor.

We visit Taman Laut, literally "friends of the sea" park — impressive infrastructure, exhibitions, a turtle hatchery. What really stands out, though, is the sheer number of resort guests arriving on the beach, most of whom have clearly never snorkeled before — obvious in every gesture.

Some feed the fish, drawing them close, though it's left the fish expecting handouts now — at a few spots where I snorkeled myself, they'd grown aggressive, nipping at me, wrasses especially.

I film the sea of orange life jackets covering the water — a strange sight altogether.

Back aboard, a third dive at "the point." Magic again — fish visible in every direction, yellow-striped snappers, the resident pufferfish hovering by its usual rock, entirely unbothered by my approach. The dive turns genuinely magical when I follow a turtle for over fifteen minutes, surfacing alongside her as she feeds, mostly on algae, wrasses picking off scraps behind her.

A school of monos threads past just above a huge table coral. Big sweetlips present, needlefish hanging near the surface. Then it turns truly special — a bumphead takes a bite from the coral, a turtle passes, jacks launch into a feeding frenzy on the fry school, monos still present, a yellow cloud of snapper hovering over the reef.

A big grouper retreats into its cave. Two cowrie shells shift slightly, mantles drawn over their smooth tiger-patterned shells.

I don't want to surface, extending the dive well past when I should. A school of parrotfish grazes the reef too; two rainbow runners pass at the edge of the blue, fusiliers raining down from every direction.

That afternoon, another dive, then we head for the small island right off the ship.

Coral coverage here is astonishing — huge fields, everything oversized. The reef's clearly suffered, crown-of-thorns still scattered throughout, but angelfish, butterflyfish, groupers, yellow snapper, caesio all present. It's the parrotfish that really draw the eye, though — huge schools grazing randomly across the

reef, mostly, I notice, targeting already-dead coral, leaving trails of sand behind them.

They genuinely produce enormous amounts of sand this way — how much of any given beach actually started as parrotfish waste, I honestly couldn't say.

After the dive, Orla and I head ashore hoping for food, letting the rest of the crew go ashore that evening too. Along the way, a fishing boat's pulling in a net — we get closer, take a few photos, and I climb aboard. Mostly big jacks, a couple of rainbow runners, needlefish. We buy three, still alive — impossible to get fresher. Though I'd assumed fishing was prohibited within the park boundaries — clearly not enforced in practice.

We reach a resort full of Japanese tourists, many just back from a dive. No food available there, so we walk on to another beach, watching squirrels and birds along the way, eventually settling at a small café to catch the end of a football match.

Back aboard, the rest of the crew ashore, I strip off my shirt, cook the fresh fish, open a bottle of wine — we finish the meal with whatever sweets remain.

April 22, 2001

Acting class in the morning. During warm-up, I stress conscious awareness of one's own movement — not necessarily eliminating unconscious gestures, but at least noticing them. We each catch ourselves scratching a nose, running hands through hair, some odd tension in the jaw — and I suggest repeating the gesture deliberately, this time fully aware of doing it.

I move into solo conscious work after a shaking trance loosens my whole body. Following the warm-up, everyone loosens their hands, massages their own face, stretching the facial muscles in every direction — "feel

the fingertips," then making contact, until every finger connects with another's.

We split into groups, tasked with using only music, hands, and faces.

It turns out beautifully — a real success of creativity, and it reveals something too about how interconnected our muscles really are. For many, this is their first real realization of it, since they'd expected the whole body to move, only to find hands and face alone carrying just as much expression.

We shipshape and move closer to Pulau Lima, five miles off — Ferdi in charge, me driving the small boat.

First dive on the east point — incredible coral, fields of sea whip, anemones with clownfish everywhere. I go a bit deeper for action — jacks patrolling, rainbow runners cruising past. Angelfish, parrotfish, butterflyfish, pufferfish, porcupinefish, a school of snapper, minnows, fusiliers. A good dive.

Tending the second dive, hanging onto the boat, I notice fish in one corner accustomed to being fed — they start nipping at me too. I locate what turns out to be the big seamount, reportedly the best diving in the whole area.

Third dive, with Ferdi — magical light, the reef top wonderfully scenic with wild formations and fields of anemone, enough that I burn through an entire roll of film on this dive alone.

Sunset on the beach.

Half-fish, half-terrestrial gobies cling to the rocks nearby — a small reminder of where we all originally came from. Wild beach, a passage through to the far side of the island, Pulau Lima itself.

The rocks here are all granite, beautiful stone veined with quartz here and there.

On the sand, bleached coral rubble smoothed by the waves — I collect a few pieces for a necklace, part of a sea-shaman costume I'm putting together.

Quiet contemplation atop a rock.

Speech night, plenty of talk about home, about communication with parents.

I try to set the tone by proposing a new word: contemplation as the art of watching one's own actions, always turned inward rather than only outward — contemplating the simple act of washing dishes, tying a knot.

Can't sleep, so I watch a film instead — *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, oddly reminding me of Bradley. I pick up the last stretch of Aram's watch, then Orla's, catching up on this log in between.

I've stopped noting the obvious day-to-day — routes, finances, dive briefings, rigging work. I still whip a rope or two now and then, keeping the small craft of it alive.

April 23, 2001

Middle of the night, Inge wakes me — the anchor chain's behaving in jerks. Radar confirms we're dragging. I let out more chain, but it runs clean to the shackle with no more slack to give — no way to raise it as rigged. I improvise a rope-and-hook system to lift it a few meters instead.

Engine on, winch engaged, hook set on the chain, a few turns on the winch head, done.

In the morning, Ferdi and Sam dive to check the anchor — they don't think it actually dragged. Oh well.

The first dive goes out while we hold strat command in Nemo's — mostly about roles, people's plans, and my own thoughts on what an expedition really entails for

those reluctant to stick around through dry dock. Life at sea includes ship maintenance too, and it's often in those stretches that the real systems knowledge gets learned.

They locate the big seamount, and their excitement afterward tells me it's a genuinely good dive. I throw together lunch quickly — fried fish, rice, broccoli, salad, salsa.

The dive: we drop to eighty feet, along the edge of granite boulders rising to within forty feet of the surface, thick with soft coral and huge sea fans, colorful and dramatic. But it's the fish that turn genuinely wild — cloud after cloud of small silverfish hovering above the fans, jacks moving in to feed. A huge school of trevally holds the area's edge. We spot a moray, and a big grouper perched over the rock. A magic, magic dive — a few lone barracuda, schooling mackerel, a couple of large Spanish mackerel too. More jacks, pufferfish, angelfish.

We return to the same spot around 3:00 p.m. — even better than before, a striking moment when a school of juvenile barracuda cruises past on one side, larger adults above them, a school of big-eye trevally further back, fusiliers raining down, clouds of silverfish, jacks cutting right in front of us. Two mackerel make a pass.

The sun sits low behind it all, casting everything in silhouette, more jacks flashing silver as they hunt.

The big grouper lets me approach within fifty centimeters — clearly pregnant, her belly noticeably full. How many of her young, I wonder, will end up meals for the jacks themselves?

April 24, 2001

Heading for the Perhentian Islands, twenty-five miles off, wind blowing from the north.

We reach our anchorage around 4:00 p.m. — enough daylight left for a trip ashore, a few provisions picked up.

Tuesday night we replay the PCRf conference recording, the conversation drifting eventually toward satellites.

April 25, 2001

We decide against scheduling dives today, giving the crew a proper day to catch up on communication instead.

Laundry day. I end up sorting through six weeks of accumulated mess, rigging lines across the entire ship, nearly blocking out the sun.

I clean, grease, and organize the camera gear, catch up on finances and general organization.

An afternoon meeting. Ferdi's off to Thailand for two days. Piers and Inge take the night off. Aram's long communication saga finally wraps up — he's reached Sandy at last.

A trip to Long Beach, hitching a ride with locals — an impressively elaborate internet setup inside beachfront cabanas, about as scenic a workspace as I've ever seen. A jungle trail leads to the island's far side, past a huge monitor lizard, an enormous spider's web, a few squirrels along the way.

Backpacker culture in full swing here — bungalows, sandy beach, volleyball, cheap food, barbecue, chocolate milkshakes, banana pancakes. Something like a permanent summer camp, genuinely interesting to observe.

Meanwhile, local men grow visibly bolder around all the visiting tourists — Islam's influence noticeably absent from this particular corner.

April 26, 2001

We move the ship over to the smaller islands, six miles off. The navy patrol boats have already left early; with no wind, raising anchor goes smoothly.

First dive: pleasant but uneventful. I focus on smaller subjects — mantis shrimp under ledges, cardinalfish, sponges, more shrimp, a scorpionfish. Some coral's grown well, though only in scattered patches — something's clearly off here. Large stretches covered in brown algae, and I find traces of oil in the water, likely spillage from nearby offshore drilling.

A white-bellied sea eagle flaps helplessly in the water, unable to fly. We approach carefully with the small boat — what to do? If we try to lift him aboard, will he strike out?

As we near him, he flaps uselessly. On impulse, I help him aboard using one of the paddles. He rises, spreading his wings to dry, looking Piers, Orla, and me straight in the eye.

A wingspan of at least six feet — genuinely impressive, watching us from mere centimeters away. He's likely lost a fight — blood visible along his neck. We motor carefully toward Tokong Rock, but as we approach he takes off, only to fall again fifty meters on, unable to sustain flight. Another eagle circles above, making aggressive passes at our injured passenger.

We catch up with him again; docile now, he climbs back aboard, resting on the paddle. His talons, sharp, five centimeters long — I picture them sinking into prey, no escape once they close. His beak, razor-edged, curved sharply at the tip. His outer flight feathers have dried, though his belly and tail remain soaked, too heavy right now for comfortable flight. Piers gently touches the tip of one wing; the eagle seems to understand, somehow, that

we mean no harm. His eyes hold mine — genuinely mesmerizing.

Nearly to shore, and this time facing the right direction, he tries again, landing instead in the water near a rock. The rival eagle dives again, right over us, threatening our friend once more.

He finally makes it onto a rock ashore — looking, somehow, like a chastened child, having lost a fight, nearly his life along with it. The other eagle doesn't relent easily. What strikes me most is the sheer power these birds carry — if the intent were truly to harm, there'd be little any of us could do about it.

We dive at Tokong Rock itself. A turtle feeds on a sponge; I play alongside her a while, and she keeps drifting back for more, letting me get a close shot of her face as she eats.

We descend further — giant soft coral everywhere, jacks cruising to feed on minnows, foot-long pufferfish allowing close approach, sea anemones hosting at least five different clownfish species.

We spot a nurse shark tucked under a ledge, about a meter and a half long. I gently grab its tail hoping to coax it into view for a photo, but it only burrows deeper. We find three total, mostly inaccessible — Orla, over the whole dive, counts nine.

Shoals of snapper, bream, fusiliers feeding on the incoming current.

Three well-camouflaged scorpionfish spotted too.

Blue-spotted stingrays scattering everywhere. Then a genuinely wild parade begins — barracuda of every size, schooling close to the bottom, a huge one presiding above them. Then a massive school of jacks circles us entirely. Mad, genuinely.

Angelfish, butterflyfish, wrasse, soldierfish, anthias, chromis, all actively feeding — action in every direction, a full 360 degrees of activity.

Plenty of shells too, feeding steadily on oysters.

Everything aligning perfectly — right time, right place.

Thursday-night dinner under the stars.

April 27, 2001

Lab in the morning. I cook both breakfast and lunch — been a while since I've properly cooked. Kerosene lamps, fresh vegetables — I genuinely enjoy tending the galley, and it teaches, indirectly, that things can be done both quickly and properly. Hummus, garlic pasta, olives, oyster mushrooms, olive oil. A cauliflower salad, whole grain bread.

The dive proves magical again, back at Tokong Laut, visibility straight out of a dream.

Small nurse sharks again along most ledges, jacks hunting steadily, pufferfish, porcupinefish. Genuinely different every time — the sheer scale of the landscape striking on every pass.

Orla radios the ship — get ready, some divers have spotted a whale shark nearby. We miss seeing it ourselves, though everything else remains on full display. As usual, I gravitate toward close-ups — a titan triggerfish feeding on a rock oyster right up close, wrasses picking through the scraps left behind.

April 28, 2001

More dives at Tokong Laut — always something happening. Sharks tucked in crevasses, jacks hunting near the surface, waves breaking in the shallows, barracuda cruising through.

Timing matters, though — otherwise the place starts to feel like a theme park, sometimes ten boats at once unloading divers, a wall of bubbles obscuring what should be open blue water.

April 29, 2001

Acting class first thing in the morning — a long sequence of movement work through walking patterns, stretching exercises, visualizations of a tree in various states from healthy to decaying and back, and imagined walks across a dozen different surfaces and textures. We finish with split-body exercises — one side fluid, the other rigid — and a solo exercise fighting an invisible opponent, first alone, then as a group.

We raise anchor and leave the Perhentian Islands, heading back to Pulau Lima, near Redang.

The moment we drop anchor, a boat pulls alongside — Yves, briefly, leaving again by morning. A quick catch-up, and he's off.

Sunday night.

April 30, 2001

Pulau Lima. First dive at the southwest corner — current running over two knots, too strong to reach the big seamount. The area's lovely regardless — gardens of sea anemone, blue-spotted stingrays feeding in the sand, anthias and cardinalfish among the staghorn. Gorgeous shallow coral garden. We spot another feeding turtle — they've shown up on nearly every dive here.

We find the big seamount again — at a hundred and twenty feet, the largest whitetip shark I've ever seen appears, a full three meters, larger than I'd realized they could grow. He heads straight toward me before veering off. Schools of jacks present as always, hunting the fry.

Visibility under fifteen feet, turning every sighting into a genuine surprise.

May 1, 2001

We move the ship early — wind and current make raising anchor tricky, a two- to three-knot current sweeping through, wind shifting unpredictably lately, with occasional northerly gusts.

We prepare for our final day of diving at Redang.

First dive, a rock exposed at low tide — caves draped in soft coral, fish everywhere. We swim first through a school of yellowtail barracuda, groupers, angelfish.

In a sandy patch, a two-meter stingray. Nearby, a fish trap holds several jacks trapped inside, banging furiously against the mesh — one hovers just outside, seemingly unable to understand how to free his companions.

Toward the dive's end, a two-meter blacktip circles the rock.

The bumphead parrotfish dive: near the surface, needlefish wait patiently for their favorite prey, small silverfish schooling in the surge's foam.

Under one crevasse, a rare black lionfish hides.

Around the boulders, pairs of butterflyfish graze steadily on coral polyps, inseparable throughout.

Big pufferfish, large enough to carry a few hitchhiking remoras, and porcupinefish with their wide, watchful eyes hover motionless until we get too close, then paddle awkwardly away.

A turtle, absorbed in feeding on a sponge, doesn't notice us at all — nearsighted by nature, relying mostly on detecting movement.

At fifteen feet, a school of monos threads between the rocks.

A grouper drifts lazily out of our path, while angelfish scatter nervously as we approach.

The rocks are thick with oysters, sponges, tunicates, and a few table corals, casting sharp silhouettes against the sun — cardinalfish and anthias sheltering within.

We head for the reef's edge, descending into a sandy area where fish lie perfectly still, striped, until they move — the stripes vanishing instantly, replaced by plain white.

Gobies keep watch over their burrows while their shrimp partners dig steadily.

A huge stingray rests on the sand, feeding. I approach centimeter by centimeter until I'm less than a meter away — she's clearly aware of me, then glides off gracefully. We spot four total, some resting entirely buried in sand, kicking up small clouds of dust whenever we pass too close.

We cross a flat garden of soft coral, lizardfish scattered about, a few jacks passing, sea cucumbers everywhere.

But the real highlight comes when we find a school of huge bumphead parrotfish — usually shy, they let us approach closely enough to touch, arms fully extended. They feed noisily, sharp beaks cracking off pieces of coral. I stay among them for a full fifteen minutes. Ironically, I never bothered changing film beforehand, shooting the whole encounter through a close-up lens anyway — never before this close, genuinely eye to eye. A magical dive, our last in the Redang area.

I prepare tomorrow's paperwork — need to clear the ship out properly in Terengganu.

Dinner conversation runs deep, drifting somewhere genuinely worthwhile by the end of the evening.

May 2, 2001

Before catching the ferry, a quick stop at a local fishing boat just pulling in. A few words exchanged, a look at their catch, and they open the hold. I pick out a big barracuda, ask about mackerel — the man beside us holds one up proudly. "Yes, yes — saya mau beli," I tell him.

With five kilos of squid on top, we're set through to Tioman.

The small ferry's stopped running — the big catamaran's taken over that route entirely. It takes an hour and forty-five minutes to reach Chendering, the fishing port eight miles from Terengganu. Too late to catch the actual unloading; boats already secured, crews busy mending nets instead.

I catch a taxi to meet Abdul at the port authority, and we spend the entire day together — customs next, then battery water, the fruit and vegetable market, a few sarongs, even managing a quick email check before visiting his home to meet his wife and children. Back to the ferry afterward, where I finally collapse into sleep.

Aboard, I decide to prep the ship but leave early the next morning instead, letting everyone get a proper night's rest first.

May 3, 2001

Leave Redang.

Chapter Twelve

Sarawak, Borneo, Malaysia

June 16, 2001

The plane circles over Kuching, revealing a maze of estuaries and river systems. I spot the ship's deck below, recognizing the green tarp first.

I meet Orla at the airport.

Kuching turns out to be a genuinely modern city, heavy Chinese influence — most shop signs in Chinese — though the market itself teems with faces from the thirty-odd ethnic groups living across the surrounding region.

My feet touch the deck. Reconnection. So glad to be back — I couldn't have taken much more of the West. I belong to a sea-people tribe, a nomad at heart.

Everyone looks healthy, in good spirits, the ship's mood strong. An evening of travel reports — the Heraclitus exhibition in London, my brother's kids and wedding, time in Paris.

After a short strat session, we decide the crew will split into two groups, each taking six days to explore the region. I'd wanted the second trip, but visa timing means I'll leave early the next morning instead.

June 17–23, 2001

I'm including Orla's own log here for this stretch.

Sarawak, Saturday, June 16

Before our bodies meet again, because our souls are already connected and in sync — a few words that can still say something. Not a single day

passed without dreaming of you, asleep or awake. The distance made me realize the privilege of loving you. I counted the days. I wasn't idle, but I kept wishing you were there. I learned I truly can't live without you anymore — and that was only six weeks. So before we're reunited, all I can write is, in capitals: I LOVE YOU.

A reunion — arms wringing the breath from my body, a fever, skin on fire, no exhalation, no words, just silence in an arrivals hall, the return of a love that never really left, only stood geographically apart. Closer, tighter, until we're one again.

Sunday, June 17

Irrawaddy dolphins send us off — a boat loaded with Michel, Heather, Sam, Susie, Aram, and me, plus far more backpacks than any of us will actually need this week. We part ways at the Kuching port authority café for our own week of separate exploring. Michel and I set off on foot toward the Sunday market, though we don't actually know where it is. A taxi carrying the others passes us mid-roundabout; the driver offers to send one for us too. We wait in thin roadside shade, watching Sunday traffic crawl by.

The market's thriving — salak fruit like armadillo skin, huge pomelos, greens of every shade, tiny fish in plastic tubs alongside flabby black goldfish, peanut pancakes. Everything fresh, beautiful, and cheap. At a stall wafting smoke, fish split and skewered on bamboo for smoking, a man gives us a quick rundown of where we might go over the next couple of days. He admits his English outpaces his Malay, fourteen years in tourism, throwing out suggestions until we're thoroughly confused — with no guidebook and no plan, we pick one at random: "Take the bus to Bau."

Within minutes of leaving the market we're in another world entirely — a kampung suburb of pastel houses, plank walkways over small creeks, friendly children calling hello, laundry drying on

every line. We find the bus station near a kitschy mosque dome, and ninety minutes later we're in Bau, a sleepy mountain town despite the blazing heat, men in thick shirts and wool hats regardless. We eat duck and chicken noodles, liver-and-greens soup, upstairs from the market, watched politely by locals as we watch them back.

We wander half-heartedly through town looking for direction, end up at a bar talking with a retired oil rigger, thirty-seven, settled now after decades in the North Sea, Nigeria, the Gulf of Mexico. He tells us plainly we're in the wrong part of Sarawak for what we're after, that we should head back to Kuching and start over — and that we'd missed, by one night, the massive Gawai harvest festival celebrations. We leave Bau to its collective hangover and catch the bus back within two hours of arriving.

We check the Lonely Planet forums for advice, staggered as always by the sheer detail strangers offer each other — full itineraries down to who's cooking your breakfast. Reading it almost feels like having already gone. We learn, too late, that Bau's actual claim to fame is as a gathering place for the Bidayuh people and their longhouses — the roughneck led us on a merry chase, though we both took him at his word without question. A taxi drops us at a cheap Chinese-run hotel, the owner utterly indifferent to whether we stay or not — perhaps worn down by an endless stream of equally charmless European backpackers, or perhaps just having a hard day. We nap, then catch the tail end of a waterfront dance show — sape guitars, gongs, drums, girls in pastel satin. Chatting with the sape player afterward, he too gently discourages us from expecting anything beyond an official cultural tour — he's from Bau himself, ironically, and does his best to steer us toward the mainstream path. It's dawning on us that this is a kind of self-protection, a buffer against the West: take what you've already explored and leave the rest to us.

A very late dinner in a Chinese seafood restaurant that reopens its kitchen just for us — squid, prawns, vegetables, rice, four drinks, twenty-eight ringgit total, bananas on the house. Michel fills me in properly on the London exhibition. I sleep in a city for the first time in six months; Kuching stays quiet through the night.

Monday, June 18

Two grudging cups of coffee from our hostess, not a word exchanged, though Michel charms a smile out of her eventually. We head for the tourist information office, past a Chinese temple, and the woman there steers us firmly toward an organized tour or the Sarawak Cultural Village rather than any real longhouse visit. We hop off the bus early at Santubong, a small Malay fishing village, wander the beach, cut through woods behind a school, watch children pour out for lunch at the bell. Motorbike taxis carry us on to the Cultural Village.

Forty-five ringgit entry. The tour opens with a staged "ceremony" at the round Bidayuh house — gongs, drums, two girls dancing with forced smiles, over before it's begun. The Lonely Planet calls it, aptly, "a photogenic ethnic theme park." At the Iban longhouse, some of the performers clearly also sleep here; a woman demonstrates rice-grinding, an old man carves beside a fire extinguisher, every artifact stamped with a museum catalog number. A French photographer and writer, working a travel magazine, descend on a weaving woman with a wall of lenses. We follow them to the Penan hut, where a man demonstrates blowpipe hunting for the camera, aiming at a Coke can propped in the trees — thirty visiting schoolchildren crowd around, cheering and booing his shots, and he plays along good-naturedly.

The journalists race off for the theater show. We follow — a dramatized survey of Sarawak's ceremonial dances, the Iban "sea Dayaks," the

Bidayuh "land Dayaks," a sape solo, an Orang Ulu comedy bit with a girl pulled from the audience. It ends as a kind of tourism commercial for the whole state.

We go back for the Penan performer, but he's slipped through a gap in the fence, back to the actual jungle.

We catch the bus onward toward Bako National Park, narrowly avoiding a minibus tout's inflated fare — two ringgit each versus the seventy-five he'd quoted. A small boat, thirty ringgit, carries us past fishing stakes and bamboo platforms where fishermen check their traps, mountains blue in the afternoon haze, rock faces along the Bako coastline shaped uncannily like eyes and mouths.

We check in at park headquarters, and the ranger points us toward the Lintang trail for proboscis monkeys. We find them at a watering hole near the mangroves — about twenty of them, sniffing the air with their strange trunk-like noses, feeding, then vanishing suddenly into the deeper forest. Michel's halfway up a tree within the hour, watching branches sway with their passage. Their calls sound almost like pigs; the big males vault branch to branch on leg strength alone. As dusk falls we watch one shake a whole tree just by clinging to it, apparently for the sport of startling a rival below.

We eat nasi goreng at the canteen and sleep unbelievably early — Michel still jet-lagged from his long trip east, barely two days in Sarawak and hardly sitting still since he landed.

Tuesday, June 19

Just after dawn we cross to the mangroves on the park's west side and immediately meet a troupe of macaques. Michel's newly repaired camera is malfunctioning again; a curious macaque creeps up to inspect it alongside him, no more successful than he is. A screaming baby monkey clings to its mother's tail until, worn down, she finally shakes

him off to forage in peace — he eventually summons the courage to spring back onto her. We watch them dig for crabs in the tide pools, gnaw through mangrove roots with startling force. Back at the canteen, the resident troop makes commando raids on unattended plates, held off only by an old ranger with a slingshot. A monkey breaks into our own room and makes off with an apple, leaving a tidy trail of chewed core. We find the proboscis troop again near the mangroves, some still curled up half-asleep in the branches, and follow them a while longer through dense bush. They never quite flee, but never let us close either. The Lintang loop, meant to take three and a half hours, takes us nearly five — plenty to stop and listen for. Blue mushrooms, red dragonflies, pitcher plants, musical thorns, butterflies settling beside us to listen too. Forest sounds that could just as easily be city sounds — an airplane, a stadium crowd, footsteps, a distant highway.

As night falls, rats and bats gather around our cottage, moved two doors down the row for reasons no one explains.

Wednesday, June 20

The macaques turn aggressive near the mangroves, one lunging at Michel, terrifying a girl too frightened to walk past them again. They seem hungrier today, more frantic digging for crabs. One yawns in the early light, revealing two genuinely alarming fangs.

Silver leaf langurs, beautiful and long-furred with almost angelic faces, see us off at the beach on our way out. We take the boat back past a kampung raised above the tide line, old men ferrying families in beaten sampans, a Chinese barber working pressure points into a customer's arm, a group of men reading the day's news aloud together. We nearly miss the return bus, saved by Michel's wolf whistle.

We change buses in Kuching, headed for Sri Aman. A kopi susu stop, a good exchange rate from a shopkeeper, cigarettes, and I sleep almost the entire ride despite the heat.

We arrive and walk down to the jetty past a run of Chinese-owned shops — the Chinese seem to hold most of the economy here, even in Kuching.

Rather than wait for tomorrow's express boat, Michel talks our way onto a small private boat instead, a man heading twenty minutes upriver to his longhouse. His young son stays behind, wary of the two strangers.

The longhouse sits along the riverbank, gardens and tin sheds in front, pigs beneath the floor, chickens and ducks wandering freely. Inside, a long coffee-colored verandah runs past twenty-two doors. We're brought to the chief's house, given orange drink and dried snacks, and told we're welcome to stay — perhaps through Saturday. Tonight, after dinner, the musicians will play; if summoned, they must oblige.

The women take me to bathe in the river, sarongs on. The chief's mother-in-law, a beautiful older woman, laughs and chats with me in rapid Iban, entirely convinced I understand every word. When I ask her name she simply points to her forearm tattoo. Names, it seems, aren't really the point here — I become, simply, "Missus."

As night falls, families gather along the verandah, lit by small kerosene lamps stretching off into darkness. Dinner is a beautiful reddish-barred fish, cooked in soup with rice, ferns, and a salty sambal, eaten mostly by hand. Afterward we show Ensudin photos of the ship — he says little, just smiles, a quiet man whose considerable English, learned under British colonial rule, only reveals itself gradually.

The gongs come out, strung on a wooden frame, and the music slowly finds its rhythm. I'm pulled onto the dance mats and, by all accounts, make a wonderful mess of it, to everyone's delighted

laughter. I'm offered betel nut, spitting awkwardly into an old milk-powder tin — here it's the women who chew. Michel eventually gets pulled up too, his first "aeroplane" arm-sweep sending a small boy screaming and the gong player into helpless laughter that spreads through the whole gathering.

We sleep in a doorless room, red curtains for privacy, alarm clocks chiming musically through the night.

Thursday, June 21

The household wakes gently after six, nothing begun without a proper round of coffee, Milo, and fried fish crackers first. The blowpipe and a kris come down off the wall so we can see how food was once gathered; Ensudin shows us his small collection of homemade guns — purchase is now illegal, though the knowledge of building them persists.

We walk out to Sylvester's garden plot after breakfast, past a thin remaining strip of jungle behind the cultivated land, evidence of logging having taken most of the old forest giants. His wife plants fern stalks with careful, unhurried precision while he talks with us about his years working in PNG — Kimbe, Kavieng, Rabaul, Port Moresby — and his shifting plans for the land: oil palm, then pepper, then taro, whatever the conversation happens to suggest.

Back at Ensudin's kitchen, more coffee, more snacks, conversation drifting past us in Iban, the occasional smile or translated fragment tossed our way.

Sylvester takes us upriver after lunch — a stop at a neighboring longhouse where rice wine distills slowly through a rubber hose into a kettle, and we're each handed a glass of it, startlingly good. Michel coughs at his. We visit the chief's house there, coconut-rice biscuits, a calendar of a pin-up model beside the official longhouse ledger. Then a walk to a hillside church through pepper plants, a

bright yellow snake startling off the path, a graveyard decorated with beer cans and tiled headstones bearing small printed photographs of the dead — recently past their day of remembrance.

Back through the pepper fields, Sylvester explaining the drying process for white and black pepper, Michel noting how Madagascar picks theirs unripe instead, for green pepper. Another longhouse, another tour through open, sparsely furnished rooms strung with crucifixes, a framed portrait of the Sultan of Brunei and his two wives on one wall. A very deaf old man is shouted at good-naturedly; a drum's pressed into my hands. We're pulled into the riverside store for a round of proper drinking, the priest producing a hidden bottle. Sylvester grows warmly emotional, calling us brother and sister, insisting everything here is freely given, no payment expected — a culture built entirely on hospitality and shared space, so different, he says, from what he imagines he'd receive traveling to England or France. Talk turns, oddly, to a Utah man with seven wives and twenty-nine children, then to the Iban's own more measured approach to family size, then to Sylvester's own quietly contradictory account of monogamy — faithful to his one wife, he says, while also maintaining what he calls "girlfriends" during his years in PNG.

We stumble back down to the boat at day's end, headed to the first longhouse for the night — inevitably, more wine. Sylvester's family welcomes us with more snacks, more drink, a can of Stella appearing from nowhere. He calls us family outright; I find myself unexpectedly moved. We move to sit with the chief, hawk-featured, sparing with words, his wife serving fish soup alongside, oddly, frankfurter soup too. I've reached my limit by now, floating rather than drinking further.

The dancing starts again outside — I do better tonight, finding a real moment of trance in it; Michel dances too, laughed at fondly, undeterred. I finally ask for bed, head pounding, and sleep on a mattress in the center of Sylvester's family's house, alarm clocks chiming through another pitch-black night.

Friday, June 22

A gentle wake, coffee and biscuits I can't quite manage — no hangover exactly, more a full-body ache from yesterday's liquor, a strange jet-lagged tiredness. We're fed again around nine, thank our hosts, leave a little money for the shy young boy. School here runs age six to fourteen; most children return afterward to begin farming.

Heading back downriver, half-blind without my glasses (lost contacts the night before), we pass small boats trailing fine butterfly nets, stop at a riverside school where the headmaster, excellent English, walks us through their bilingual curriculum and gently laments their limited facilities compared to Europe. He asks, genuinely curious, why I wasn't afraid to simply set off up an unknown river to strangers — Malays, he says, wouldn't be so bold.

Back at Tisak, the family teases our bedraggled state — word of last night's dancing has traveled ahead of us. Sylvester unloads a boat full of gifts from his relatives upriver, banana flowers, taro leaves, new seedlings. We doze between rounds of food we didn't think we had room for.

At three we go fishing with the longhouse fisherman, a joker with a wonderful twinkle in his eye. Three boats work a rotation, casting nets and paddling back up for another pass; Michel predicts wild numbers each time, mostly wrong. We land a modest but respectable haul, the men gently ribbing another boat, an old woman teaching two small grandsons the trade. Ensudin strings our catch on a plastic thread as the tide comes racing back in, nearly catching us out.

We bathe again in the strong current and thick mud, and later watch television for the first time here — an absurd Amazon-cannibal film the household finds endlessly funny, grandmother included, disapproving glances notwithstanding. Sylvester calls us over for one more round, this time Australian rum, the bottle steadily emptied by everyone but Ensudin, who confesses he's never been much of a drinker. Talk turns to his son-in-law's teaching work, football legends of decades past, Michel's own love of the game, more photos from Sylvester's PNG years. We're finally, gladly, sent to bed, an early start ahead for the express boat back to Sri Aman.

Saturday, June 23

R.H. Ensudin, Tisak Ulu Skrang, Sarawak, Malaysia 95000.

Coffee, cigarettes, and a muddy walk down to the riverbank, both men steadying my hand onto the boat. We wash our feet before going inside, watch the tide roll out through the cabin windows, women boarding with produce for market. Michel's dance partner from our first night sits across from us, smiling the whole way to Sri Aman.

We're in Sri Aman by eight, noodles at a Chinese café, a quick stock-up at a musty art-supply shop before the bus back to Kuching — freezing at first, then unbearably hot once we stop for soda and a newspaper full of storm warnings. In Kuching we check email, buy postcards, pick up fresh curry paste wrapped in banana leaf.

Brad meets us near the ship as we arrive, the taxi driver abandoning us roadside in what feels like the middle of nowhere. A quiet ship — Sam's already left, pulled home by family, no word yet on her next steps. Heather announces she's staying on, a relief given the timing of upcoming science work. Eibis steams the emperor fish bought in Mersing; we trade stories from our

separate weeks, then sleep in Nemo's, insects and a distant kampung celebration carrying me off.

With only six days, we couldn't hope to reach the true heart of the jungle. But we got a real taste of Sarawak — the Sunday market, the old gold-mining town of Bau, music and dance at the waterfront, the fishing village of Santubong, the strange theme-park quality of the Cultural Village, two days following proboscis monkeys, silver langurs, macaques, and three days on the river among the Iban in their longhouses. We even spotted Irrawaddy dolphins in the Sarawak River itself.

June 24, 2001

An easy Sunday — the second team heads off. I spend the whole day painting, watch two documentaries, one by Bob Chappell on the Penan of Mulu National Park, the other the Blair brothers' 1978 search for the same.

Still craving river food, I boil shrimp with lemongrass, soybean sprouts, jungle fern with belacan — that pungent shrimp paste. Pure, uncomplicated flavors, everything grown or caught locally.

With just five of us aboard, the mood stays relaxed, speeches running deep and personal.

The insect bites I brought back with me have started to scar — I can't resist scratching them anyway.

Nemo's has turned into an art studio, creative energy still running from the trip. Artaud resurfaces in my thinking, reading **The Theatre and Its Double** alongside a review mentioning him in connection with our London performance.

June 25, 2001

We wake up together somehow, without any formal start to the day. Orla and Heather head to the nearby kampung for visas and flights.

After a look through the finances, I spend time deep in the ship's belly, taking stock, cleaning, sorting bins.

I cook local food again — a pineapple curry with ikan bilis, tiny dried fish.

Going through the log, I notice how much goes unwritten, especially when there's nothing dramatic to record.

Stormy weather, rain and thunder. The tide brings the river to life — cargo ships, fishing boats, canoes passing constantly.

I catch a catfish, first in a long while. A good sign.

My body's still adjusting to a rhythm — with so few of us aboard, we each pull two-hour watches nightly.

2:00 p.m., wind picks up to thirty knots, thunder rolling. The river swells brown, incoming tide clashing against a southwesterly wind, hard rain. The ship sits a cable off the muddy bank; my senses stay sharp, moving with her, reading how she handles caught between wind and current.

A quick radar check to log our distance from shore.

The seaman's life, I think, begins with total surrender to the elements — no hiding from them, or else.

I'm amazed a river alone can whip up such waves.

Around 4:00 I lie down in Nemo's and fall asleep instantly, dreaming vividly of logged forest, choked rivers, falling trees without enough soil left to hold them.

Sarawak's jungle keeps shrinking, cut back to the edges of its national parks, the last real oasis of untouched land — and even there, trails now, tourists walking them instead of the Penan.

The old forest way of life has become something close to myth now, not just by choice but necessity — the forest no longer feeds people the way it once did, and what animals remain need protection.

The orangutan's fate feels particularly grim — every felled tree shrinks the habitat further, and there's no simply relocating them to survive elsewhere.

The Iban hold onto real tradition regardless. Their longhouses are a remarkable way of living — tourists sometimes complain about modern materials creeping in, but it would be foolish not to use concrete steps that last thirty years instead of wood that needs replacing every three, especially with the big trees already gone.

The custom of welcoming visitors stays intact everywhere — every longhouse we visited kept its gongs and drums, everyone dancing or playing in turn through the evening. A living theater, really, without a sharp line between performer and audience — full participation instead.

They've adapted where the old costumes no longer make sense — no bird feathers, since there aren't birds like that close by anymore.

Where jungle once stood, gardens now grow — bananas, taro, eggplant, sweet potato, pineapple — enough rice to feed a community of a hundred and twenty, with surplus to sell. They've mastered the river too, skillfully built longboats, different fishing techniques for the changing tide — forty fish in an hour isn't unusual.

We ate river fish daily there — catfish, prawns, silverfish — pure food, untouched by chemicals.

Sylvester once asked me what I'd do with cleared land like his. Honestly — if you can still feed yourself well and healthily, you're already ahead of a good portion of humanity. Everyone there looked strong, healthy.

Cash flow remains the real difficulty, of course, which is why so many work, or have worked, overseas — often, ironically, for logging companies.

Trees have crossed my path constantly lately, in the forest and as fallen timber both — even near my grandmother's village back home, a huge storm recently flattened thousands of trees, salvage piles lining the roads.

That I return now to a ship anchored on a river feels far from innocent either — rivers are the veins of this whole planet. I live, these days, by the river's own rhythm, its tides, its traffic.

Every so often a small boat comes selling vegetables — three kids the other day, pumpkins, coconut, tomatoes, river mussels with unusually thin shells, no need for thick armor against waves here.

The river runs brown and silted but chemical-free. We bathe in it, as the Iban do, watchful for crocodiles — two people were taken by one at a nearby longhouse just two weeks before we arrived. Don't swim at night, and you're generally fine.

June 26, 2001

Kind river, kind wind, all through the night, stars bright overhead.

Lab in the morning feels like prayer — attention paid to the invisible, to honoring a person, to simply knowing "I am." Attention resists easy capture, wandering like a butterfly, though now and then it lands on something

real. A prayer of attention, twice weekly, shared enough that it becomes something like ritual.

Today I sink into pure sound rather than sorting it into pattern — words, phrases, and images racing past too fast to hold onto, like a subconscious flush from different times, each somehow triggering the next.

The eyes trace patterns in the carpet, faces forming from just two dots — endless small variations available at will.

Lab lands perfectly after a night of wild, vivid dreams — inhabiting different animals in sequence, moving through a bright painting of shifting yellows and oranges, worm, lizard, bird, monkey, dolphin, each somehow both itself and something more, man and animal combined.

My body's still adjusting. Sweat and more sweat — the heat seems to fry my brain at midday, and I only really come alive later. Best, I think, to follow that rhythm rather than fight it.

The ship — known to the initiated simply as herself, though the world calls her the Heraclitus.

A new fragment from her namesake, translated from the Greek: the awakened share one common world, while the sleeping each retreat into their own private one.

I find myself shuttling constantly between the two.

Wind picks up now, scattering anything loose on deck. Pattern of the day — unbearably hot at midday, wind rising by afternoon, then rain, rain, rain.

Sky clears for sunset, a rainbow over the river, fishing boats passing, men casting nets. I'll learn tomorrow, walking with the village elder, that they caught only two fish — six kilos, he says, patting his stomach, enough to eat regardless.

The sky lights up with cracking thunder stretching across the horizon. I hold the image in my mind. Suddenly the rigging itself looks like a work of art — and genuinely is one, useful in both senses, pleasing and practical at once.

In traditional cultures, "art for art's sake," as the West coined it, doesn't really exist — most museum pieces were originally functional, objects of divination, passage, or protection, never merely decorative.

June 27, 2001

On watch early, 5 a.m., fighting to keep my eyes open. I settle on rotating full attention between senses — eyes closed, ears wide open, listening past the nearby generator's hum for anything on the water. A coffee would help.

Somehow I can't draw much energy from the area tonight — feels almost like it's being drained instead.

I'm not afraid of dozing if it comes to that.

Sky brightens with the new day, sun the symbol of the day, moon of the month, each keeping its own rhythm.

The deck's wet with condensation — the river seems to breathe, rising and falling like something alive in the clouds.

Aram and Susie sleep peacefully under mosquito netting; I don't bother myself, knowing malaria's not a serious risk here. The nets look lovely regardless, soft screens against the anchor light.

I pray, a prayer to the universe — ours, at least, since science suggests there may be as many others as there are stars.

I notice how much my own judgment's been shaped lately by things I've read, especially around disaster and

"the environment" — a word too often misused, as if nature sits on one side and human creation on the other, when environment simply means environment.

Humanity's pushing its luck lately, though I don't believe it's fully suicidal in its course. We ought to stop speaking of "humanity" singular and start speaking of humanities, plural, of individuals. We're influenced, certainly, endlessly — but underneath fashion and shifting cultural fads, people tend to settle, eventually, on what they actually feel rather than some purely theoretical need.

Enough, too, with a certain cultural purism insisting this tribe or that must be "preserved" exactly as found — let them choose too. Imposing preservation is its own kind of imposition.

Kole, my old friend in the Mentawai jungle, went to the cities once, came back quickly — with lamps, bowls, cooking pots. He'll plant a garden too now. His ancestors were hunter-gatherers, often simply hungry hunter-gatherers.

Food is man's most basic focus. Feeding comes before everything else.

I love witnessing, sharing, experiencing genuinely untouched cultures — partly for a sense of beauty I find in it. But they don't see themselves that way. They simply live.

I learned a great deal from my time with Aman Lucas, a shaman there. The younger generation there can't be bothered much with the old taboos; the oldest generation still keeps a few of them active. Told that crossing a certain line invites demons until death, you won't cross it at first — but what happens the day you forget, cross it anyway, and nothing happens? You might still avoid it in front of elders, but now more from respect, or habit, than real fear.

So today, into "town." A bus to Kuching — a small run of cat coincidences along the way (Kuching means "cat" in Malay), oddly amusing, though I didn't dwell on any of it consciously.

I answer messages, deal with finances, send word to Yves about dry dock — and simply as a friend, one I don't need many words with. A few more messages here and there, keeping people in the loop.

I watch fishing boats coming into the market dock, a young Melayu man with his child and a striking woman — sea people, their winches well kept, the boat old but cared for. I ask the old man about the catch. "Sikit, sikit," he says — little, little. We talk about the weather; he was at sea during the storm that hit us on the river. "Laut kuat," he says — the sea was strong. Personifying the sea that way, calling her strong, is something every real sailor does, I think. A relationship, not just a description.

Boats double as everyday transport here, even the smallest ferries fitted now with mandatory orange life jackets — the same regulations reaching even here.

The newspaper's still full of Abu Sayyaf coverage — more hostages taken, fishermen among them, released only after ransom. I can't help thinking what might have happened had we chosen to pass through the Zamboanga corridor back in the Philippines. Life works in strange ways.

Soy milk's become something close to an addiction lately — a good one, for once.

Back aboard, Irrawaddy dolphins surface three meters off our port side — three adults, a calf, heading toward the bay's mouth. I follow by small boat for a mile or so; they're used to traffic, unshowy, surfacing to breathe without ever revealing their flukes, close enough to see the wrinkled texture of their necks. The wind picks up and I come back soaked, happy regardless.

An idea's been forming since watching the proboscis monkeys — photographing facial expressions across different monkey species, then having actors reproduce the same expressions, observing what emotion rises from simply holding the pose. I'll need Paulo's help back at the Singapore zoo, hopefully game for it.

June 28, 2001

Dolphins now arrive daily, almost on schedule, surfacing around 6:00 p.m. Rough weather today, torrential rain. Village kids visit, ten to thirteen years old, already little seamen themselves, arriving in two boats, one towing the other. They bring coconuts as an icebreaker; I give each a T-shirt. Climbing aboard, they inspect everything, clearly discussing the helm, their knots flawless, always keeping half an eye on their own boats — a bit of showmanship too, brandishing small knives and machetes, little pirates in training. They leave with their engine starting on the first pull.

They return during the heaviest rain, and we share a snack in Synesthesia.

I follow the dolphins again, same unhurried surfacing, spending time near the youngest. They return again around 9:00 p.m.; we hear their blows in the dark.

June 30, 2001

After twenty-four hours of the deepest sleep, I surface through dreams and sweat, body and mind fully out of commission — some flu, I think, but a real knockout.

Inner expeditions continue with wilder dreams still, and quiet thoughts on the simple, remarkable fact of being human at all — not granted to every living thing. Enjoy it while it lasts. A select few chase immortality; most of us won't get there, so better to make what time we have

count. Our old Sunday toast comes back to me: get it while you can.

On the river, barge after barge tows mountains of felled logs past us — the world's hunger for wood and paper apparently endless.

The kids return, bold as ever; I finally have to ask them to leave. Their self-appointed leader can't stop talking, showing off with two new friends, recounting yesterday's adventures.

Piers and his father Mike arrive — Mike now runs a successful jungle lodge in Belize, recalling its humble beginnings, growing and selling food, paddling hours for a little cash before the first hut went up.

An easy Sunday. The dolphins pass once already, heading upstream.

Speeches turn to history — James Brooke, the White Rajah, chasing off pirates, allying with the Dayaks, the tangled politics of Malays, Chinese, and the old opium trade, courtesy of Eibis. I speak about first coming aboard the ship. Orla describes a film concept she's developing, a boy, a girl, fish, sharks, and villains — tender and imaginative. Heather shares a joke from her father. Piers recalls drunken nights in Kuching and his monkey encounters. Cara talks about a trip to Ireland. Susie reflects on her week aboard. Mike tells more of Belize. Brad describes his river trip and a man he met who truly understood the water. Aram speaks romantically. Inge, on expecting the unexpected.

The river runs wild — the land's own bloodstream, and its highway too, both blessing and fate. It opened the interior to settlement, brought fresh water and rich fishing within easy reach, allowed real cultural diversity to flourish — but it also made the timber trade easy, gravity doing half the work once a log hits the water. Now much of the land bleeds from logging. Nature will

eventually reclaim territory, though not with the old wise trees that once held the soil in place — instead, fierce young scrub, choking areas man himself can no longer easily pass through. Gone, too, the big fruit trees that fed monkeys, birds, mammals, whole small ecosystems. The balance will shift, not toward death exactly, but toward the loss of certain species — and with them, certain ways of life. The nomadic life is simply no longer possible here, though Sarawak, compared to much of the world, still holds vast semi-wild land.

Malaysia moves fast, well aware it's gambling its natural resources in a race to industrialize, keeping pace with global markets. But at least there's some sense of the bigger picture — protected areas, national parks, cultural diversity marketed wisely to a growing stream of tourists. Longhouses, orangutans, proboscis monkeys, all used as marketing icons to their fullest.

But nothing teaches, or inspires, quite like a great river — and she doesn't give up her secrets easily. I call her "she," a capricious lady whose ways you have to learn if you mean to live alongside her. The Iban know her well.

Sitting beneath the old skull display in a longhouse, the past comes alive in imagination — warriors preparing for a raid, canoes readied, blades sharpened, dances calling war spirits to their side.

How fortunate we are, sitting here in peace, without threat — I much prefer my head where it is rather than wrapped in rattan on a longhouse porch. Though who knows what the river spirit once demanded, in her own time.

July 2, 2001

Voices rise over the river — the first call to prayer from the nearby mosque.

Dolphins join in, blowing, moving upriver. A kind of celebration, 6:15 in the morning, still fully dark. I take it entirely for granted that a new day will come.

What is this urge to write? Fingers on keys, recording thought, word — our long, strange relationship with a kind of ephemeral immortality.

The roosters take over from the prayer call, greeting the day in their own fashion, just as taken for granted.

Pirates now operate everywhere — the Philippines, the Strait of Malacca, Indonesia. We sit in the old Brooke shipyard office in Kuching's old town, out of business since a bridge cut off river access for larger vessels. Malays now avoid Kalimantan, the Indonesian side of Borneo — pirates have always favored these snaking rivers and mangrove estuaries, perfect hiding ground.

The shipyard originally tended the Brooke family's own yachts, descendants of James Brooke, Sarawak's first White Rajah. Eibis and I examine samples of twenty different tropical hardwoods logged locally, including one called merbau, mostly found in Peninsular Malaysia — a huge exporter here, and I press the owner, kindly patient between phone calls, with questions about the logging trade.

We say a quick goodbye to Heather, who'll meet us again in Singapore.

Back aboard, the dolphins arrive on schedule again, almost ceremonial by now; the mosque's call follows a half hour later.

In the village of Siniawan, a Malay kampung on the Sarawak River, we find a driver who can help transport diesel, arranging to meet at 8:30 the next morning.

July 3, 2001

Two men wait punctually at the pontoon. We picture the whole operation ahead — rolling barrels onto rickety planks, into the river, towing them out to the ship, all timed carefully against the tide.

He's already thought ahead, though, arranging for a proper fuel boat instead — a Chinese man supplying palm plantations along the river, promising to come tonight or early tomorrow. Something about his face makes me trust him.

I spend the morning sorting finances to send to Xtine, message Gaie, seed a dry-dock planning session in everyone's mind.

Tuesday night, we read Heraclitus the philosopher — a few of his fragments copied here:

*The sun is new each day.
You never step in the same river twice.
The way up is the way down.
Those who are awake live in the same world,
while those who are asleep withdraw to their own
private world.
Seeing everything as part of a whole.
One must see that war is everywhere and conflict
is a good thing.
The sun will not go beyond its limit.
Lightning flash steers all things.
Listen to the logos — meaning.
Change is the only constant.
Everything flows.
Much learning does not teach understanding.*

How much did the ship's own name shape her fate, I wonder — I doubt she'd have survived as "the black ship that got away" under a name like Aphrodite, or Abraham.

Change aboard is the one true constant — the thing that never quite lets you rest, even against your own will. No other environment I know of has demanded such constant readjustment of behavior, character, emotion. And none has taught me nearly as much about life — capital L.

Red deck, black hull, Chinese design, synergetically shaped, named for Heraclitus, powered by passionate people and ever-burning fire — who could really predict her fate? She's steered herself, in a sense, and lets you know clearly enough whenever her spirit's been ignored.

You simply cannot stay asleep here — not only individually but as a team, someone always needs to be watching. Not purely in the seamanship sense, but something closer to the metaphysical.

The sea accepts no bad art.

With Eibis aboard, between us we can recall the ship's history firsthand back to 1984, when he first joined her in Sri Lanka — and, by his account, there hadn't been a proper Tuesday night on Heraclitus since.

July 4, 2001

Around 6 a.m., the fuel boat arrives — one of the cleanest transactions yet, eight hundred eighty-five liters of diesel at 1.08 ringgit a liter, transport already built into the price, no export permit needed.

I run lab in the morning, working through some exercises with practical framing, steering clear of anything too esoteric.

A last run into town to send messages. At the internet café, on a whim, I search my own name and find it's already turned up on two PCRf web pages. I collect a few sites on traditional junks too, including an account of

the vessel built in Pulau Duyong, and a journalist's account of sailing with pirates in China.

Eibis and I handle ship's business over lunch in a proper teahouse, watches and all, in the old Chinese tradition. The ship's shipshape, mates meeting held, small boat raised.

July 5, 2001

Anchor up around 7 a.m., tide still ebbing, wind from the west promising a good sail — though the hydraulic line nearly bursts again as we secure the anchor past the bobstay pipe.

Cargo traffic keeps passing upriver; the dolphins see us off one last time.

I can't help picturing the old days here — James Brooke's era, pirate-infested waters, headhunting Dayaks, cunning Malay traders, ever-present Chinese merchants. The Chinese held a monopoly on gold then, and still today every gold shop in the region is Chinese-owned, much of the region's real wealth still concentrated there.

Log barges keep cruising past constantly.

We depart with ten aboard — Eibis as captain, Brad first mate, Orla second mate, Aram taking third mate for the first time. Watches: eight-to-twelve, Aram and Inge; twelve-to-four, Brad, Cara, and Piers; four-to-eight, Orla, Mick, and Susie.

A last look at the river, our generous host. Once we clear open water, sails go up, Brad calling the operation in a rough, confident voice. The mainsail rises by hand, finished off on the old capstan — we can't spare the winch for it. I step back from the pulling to take photographs; we badly need real action shots of the crew, something obviously missing from the London

exhibit. I let the shutter click regardless. Close-ups of hands, faces, sail details, running my fingers along years of salt and sun-worn rope — the eyes alone never tell the whole story.

Sails set by 11:30, engine off, holding a perfect 320-degree course by compass, 305 by GPS.

What a remarkable invention the GPS is, revolutionizing seamanship — with its own tradeoffs too. Safer, certainly, position known at the press of a button, full trust placed in the technology and the assumption the charts themselves are accurate.

But new technology brings old habits fading. Aboard here we have a perfect platform to watch it happen — the sextant sleeps in its wooden box now, brought out occasionally more from romantic attachment than any real intent to keep the practice alive. We're losing touch with the stars generally; few besides Orion and the Big Dipper get recognized anymore, fewer still a single named star.

With it goes a certain mental discipline too — no more manual calculation, all handed over to GPS. The old paper-log speed test, tossing a scrap overboard and timing its passage stern to bow — the very origin of the word "knot" — long obsolete. Mechanical winches and pumps spare the hands, but with them go the old sea chanteys too, whose real function was uniting a crew's rhythm through call and response. We work the capstan in near silence now, just a shared grunt of effort on each heave.

Still, there's real beauty watching the crew gather round the capstan, the sail rising batten by batten.

I cook dinner, a tuna curry. The moon looks nearly full, and tonight brings a partial eclipse — Orla finds the timing in the nautical almanac, a small, lucky connection to the sky we otherwise rarely bother consulting.

From a pure information standpoint, we actually record remarkably little day to day — the log's comments section often bare. Maybe it's worth building in more small rituals there — sunrise, sunset, moon phase — enough to send someone back to the almanac now and then, even a thin thread of connection to the sky above us.

Not nostalgia exactly, just observation. New technology clearly opens space too — more time, more choice — and how we use that choice says something about where a culture's heading. Aboard, at least, words still have their temple: our small, rich library, Nemo's.

July 6, 2001

Writing the date, I realize we let the Fourth of July pass without marking it — less patriotic, perhaps, than Qamar or Kelly might have been, we simply dined without a thought for it. Take any year, though, and probably every date holds some historical weight somewhere. Does everything of significance deserve its own celebration?

We're motoring against the wind now — even the Chinese coin I'd glued up in the main saloon for luck hasn't helped. A line comes to mind about the superstitious nature of sailors generally: it won't hurt, and it just might help.

Chinese tradition and custom seem to run to extremes in everything.

In the West, the sea was largely a man's domain, women historically kept ashore, blamed as distraction or trouble, stirring up energy better left undisturbed at sea — ports instead filling that need through their own thriving trades. Man remains man, regardless.

In China, though, where whole families often lived aboard their vessels as a way of life, women took a

genuinely active role in seamanship. Mrs. Cheng, likely the most famous Chinese pirate of all, commanded a confederated fleet of over two thousand vessels by 1808 — larger than many national navies of the time. After four years terrorizing the Chinese coast, brutal retaliation included among her methods, she successfully fought off government fleets for years, eventually negotiating a peaceful retirement once British and Portuguese naval support entered the fight. On April 20, 1810, over seventeen thousand pirates surrendered, more than two hundred junks handed over — Mrs. Cheng herself opening a gambling house afterward, living peacefully until sixty-nine.

We're certainly not pirates, though we do live aboard full-time, women in genuine leadership roles among us. I still perform small, private rituals on the bow now and then, unadvertised — times have changed, but the meme survives, a romantic gesture, and, as the old saying goes, it just might help.

Like plenty of sailors before me, I believe in a ship's own spirit — not every ship, but the Heraclitus, carrying her combined history and experience, simply can't help embodying something of the seaman's spirit herself.

Her painted eyes look half down, half straight ahead — present and future both. The past, meanwhile, lives on in the very bodies that keep her moving.

July 8, 2001

Moon sets as sun rises, clear skies giving an unobstructed view of the orange disc climbing over the mizzen. The bow seems to chant toward the moon as she nears. Wind still forward of the beam, rigging quieter today. Less to say.

The ship feels especially beautiful today.

Most old sea voyages began with something like a prayer, everywhere, not just in the West — a ceremony marrying crew to ship, ship to sea. A necessary reminder of exactly what's being undertaken.

*Oh mighty sea,
have fair wind and stars to see,
let our songs be free,
of storms and calamity.*

July 9, 2001

Approaching the shipping lane, we mark our last peaceful night with Sunday speeches. The recurring theme: freedom on the open sea, the stars, the planets, sun and moon as constant, ever-present allies through this whole voyage.

The radio now carries unmistakably Singaporean voices, Chinese-inflected English — a navy exercise underway nearby.

We sail a while, 270 degrees, steady southerly wind; motorsailing at forty-five degrees off the beam keeps us above 4.5 knots even under engine.

The real expedition here has been mostly inward, the outer passage fairly uneventful — though a short voyage like this is exactly the right move, one last taste of open blue before the hammer and chisel of dry dock. Eibis inspects the rigging; everyone gets a final fix of salt air, digesting our stay in Sarawak. Every voyage changes you somehow — we'll all come out the other side of this one a little different. That quiet transformation, every time.

A voyage, in the end, of reconciling with the past without losing grip on the present, so as to properly steer toward the future.

July 10, 2001

Chaos again — current against us, and enormous ships everywhere. We're in the busiest strait in the world now, a real lesson in scale, both our own size and the machinery surrounding us.

Full vigilance — eyes and ears sharp, running through color codes for lights, timing estimates, pure applied geometry by feel. We roll through the bow wakes of passing tankers. Eibis and I split the watch, one of us always alert; I can't sleep deeply anyway, reading a few pages just to force my mind to unwind a little.

We reach Raffles, dock successfully on the outer berth, and are welcomed like old friends — because, by now, we are. I've never felt quite this at ease here before, mostly thanks to the open space and its sunsets to sit with.

July 11, 2001

Messages, dry-dock updates — the news being that there's no real news yet, nothing settled. The pace here seems dictated as much by circumstance as by planning. Meetings get arranged, timing worked out, the pieces slowly coming together.

July 12, 2001

Paulo visits — an extraordinary conversation, a whole book's worth in one evening, running until 4 a.m., a bottle each of rum and cognac between us, not a wasted word.

It strikes me how learning tends to get boxed into specific moments — now you learn, here are the books, this is the method — when really every moment carries its own lesson, if we remember to notice.

Learning by doing, constantly, is simply evolution — the school of life.

Humans hold a remarkably complex brain, though every creature carries its own limits — primates a good example, storage capacity finite, like any hard drive.

Hunger comes first, always — no real evolution possible without it satisfied. Paulo recalls a trip to Africa, starving children racing restaurant scrap buckets meant for pigs, fighting over bones. An image that lingers. I think of the macaques at Bako, striking the instant a guard's attention slips — those children, similarly, will likely spend their whole lives never quite grasping that food should simply be given rather than stolen.

What does real hunger feel like? We hardly know — edgy after a day without food, perhaps, but not the kind of need that could kill you. Pure animal instinct, in full force.

We debunk Wallace a little — essentially, by some accounts, a man with a gun shooting at anything that moved, under the banner of scientific collection. Brad notes, wryly, that his writing improved noticeably whenever his manservant returned from time away.

Sarawak's museum holds plenty of his old trophies — reportedly needing to shoot hundreds of orangutans before finding one intact enough to preserve, when a simple poison dart, Penan-style, would have done the job far more cleanly. He loved his trophies, and the killing, under science's convenient cover. A co-founder of evolutionary theory, quoted everywhere regardless.

More animal anecdotes follow — a starving anaconda left to die slowly in stagnant sun-baked water; a pride of lions falling into constant infighting the moment their peacekeeping leader sickened and a new male took over.

I keep returning to the idea of atrophied senses — how a twelve-year-old in certain tribal cultures knows every

plant and insect of his own forest, organically, completely, while modern man builds an imitation world instead, endlessly complex-seeming but ultimately reducible to strings of ones and zeros. The true complexity of a single leaf — shaped synergetically by starlight, soil, its neighbors — can never really be reproduced artificially.

We're reducing, in a sense, building ever more elaborate intellectual systems without the backbone of direct reality underneath. A dangerous game, and a fascinating one.

Talk turns to my idea of pairing actors against monkeys on posture and expression — what's specifically human, artistically rendered, actors painted like the animals they're echoing without knowing the animal's actual meaning behind a given gesture. A smile baring teeth reads as aggression in Japan, joviality in Europe or the States.

Science-fiction talk drifts to time travel through nanotechnology, mood-altering pills synthesizing emotional states on demand — and if time travel exists even potentially, then every possible version of it already does, and we're simply living out one thread among infinite others.

Like the film **Moulin Rouge**'s four pillars — Freedom, Truth, Beauty, and above all, Love. That, more or less, sums up my own ethics as a Frenchman, the base program mostly fixed, minor edits here and there, real change requiring something closer to a genuine shock — the trouble being, real shocks arrive unpredicted by definition.

My body reacts a thousand times faster than my conscious mind — a rope inches from my face while walking, head already dodging before the mind even registers it happened, always a slight delay between reality and awareness. Training narrows that gap, never

closes it entirely. Information moves at a certain speed regardless of volume; the senses feed constantly into various mental files, but without an existing folder, it simply lands in the trash. Computers, I increasingly think, only really mimic the linear side of intellect — the synergetic, whole-system side remains largely mysterious, dressed up in words like magic, miracle, consciousness.

Cultures relying on oral tradition can memorize entire texts after one or two hearings — a real skill, atrophying now simply from disuse. Keeping a mind properly trained takes exercise, same as the body; aboard, we set aside forty-five minutes twice a week for exactly that.

What a computer can't do is process the organic information the body itself gathers, automatically translated through the mind's own channels. What resists translation simply waits, stored, until some future method arrives to unlock it — science, in a sense, might simply be nature's translation into human terms, each new insight carrying real transformative potential. Einstein's relativity, an obvious case.

But most science remains external. An actor, in a way, becomes a true scientist of human potential — with no ready translation available externally, he has to pass everything through the inside first, then build his own outward language from what he finds there.

There's real potential too in studying extension of self — playing a pirate with a toy gun, aiming, reloading, counting shots, all without ever firing anything real. The prop becomes part of the actor, directly wired to the body-mind, the reaction to a gesture as revealing as the gesture itself — a genuine gauge, its own form of communication.

July 15, 2001

The ship looks gorgeous today — Raffles Marina's seventh anniversary. Seven years, the old cycle for cells fully renewing themselves, and the marina's clearly stepping into a new phase, positioning itself as Singapore's nautical lifestyle hub.

Known here as "the pirate ship," we lean fully into it — full costume, a rehearsed skit.

Invited by Francis Lee to the VIP lunch, we're the only non-Chinese faces there, worth noting simply as observation. A gorgeous buffet, conversation minimal but genuine.

We raise the pirate flag at 2:00, everyone fully in character. I play Maurice, a good-hearted but perpetually drunk pirate, a pack of cigarettes strapped to one arm, a toy pistol on the other, scars drawn across my bare chest. Orla's a fairy-like Angelique; Eibis plays a swashbuckling captain in the Errol Flynn mold; Aram, a stylish tattooed figure; Inge, glittery and ginger; Brad, shogun-inflected; Susie, the eager apprentice pirate.

These past days have run heavy on information exchange, real connection with other sea people — bar conversation about sunken treasure with Coe and his "chief engineer" wife, and Pirus, the dockmaster, from a Bugis family out of Sulawesi, a captain and avid diver himself. We trade treasure-hunting stories — my own old habit of collecting artifacts while living in Bermuda, working nights as a pastry chef, diving three times daily off an old silver Vespa known island-wide as "the silver bullet," visiting some three hundred fifty scattered wrecks as a divemaster.

We discuss the legendary treasure hunters — I once met Teddy Tucker in Bermuda, an old man with a glass-bottomed bucket, recalling his stories. I collected old bottles myself — port, ink, marble-stoppered soda

bottles, later selling them in Miami for sixty dollars apiece. Cannonballs, brass nails, brass blocks. Nothing, though, on the scale of what men like Mel Fisher eventually recovered.

The Bugis still trade their pinisi schooners with Singapore to this day, engineless, true masters of traditional navigation — once blocked from an old traditional anchorage by the authorities over illegal trading, they simply scattered along the coast instead until the government relented and allowed regulated access back to it. A Bugis family name always gives away its trade — farmer, merchant, or "trader," a gentler word for pirate. Pirus comes from such a trading family, his great-grandfather's arrival in Singapore the reason he's here at all today.

Treasure lies scattered across the Philippines too, though in my experience, no treasure hunter I've ever met lived a genuinely happy life afterward — something like a curse follows the gold fever. Fisher lost both his wife and son to it; Tucker, by most accounts, ended a rather miserable old man. All of them, somehow, forgetting that none of that gold travels with you to the grave.

July 16, 2001

A seaman's dinner — I'm busy in the galley as guests arrive.

I've invited a few old salts for an evening of storytelling — Tuesday being, traditionally, salon night, the art of conversation, though tonight's actually Monday. Everyone's arrived, unknowingly, in a kind of costume anyway — no one consciously matching, everyone simply dressed as themselves. I stay bare-chested, playing chef and host for the evening.

Talk turns to orcas — different pods carry genuinely different cultures. Fish-eating resident pods, recorded using at least four distinct call patterns, live largely peaceful lives; transient pods hunting whales for their tongues show far more brutal behavior — same species, near-opposite ethics. Culture, it seems, may not be a purely human trait after all. They also hunt seals by swimming sideways, hiding their tall dorsal fins until the last moment.

Around the table: Warren Blake, a New Zealand conservationist who's spent thirty-five years around Southeast Asia, his classic boat "Four Friends" built in Duyong, promoting ecotourism as an alternative livelihood. Coe and his "chief engineer," three years in the Philippines behind them. A South African couple working on malaria-spread mapping through remote sensing across East Africa. And an old Canadian, full of stories — tracking radioactive krill under Arctic ice for Russian submarine detection, orca observation, Alaskan fishing, once a saddle maker, among many other lives.

We start, as always, with disaster stories — the mental kind, since pain itself doesn't really stay stored in the body the way psychological pain does. Warren opens with a genuinely wild mako shark attack story.

Talk turns to sharks generally, always a favorite subject — how vibration draws them in, a knife tapped on a tank, coconut-shell rattles used by Melanesian shark callers, helicopter blades implicated in more than a few attacks on stranded survivors. Orla tells the story of me calling a shark underwater in Manus with nothing but my voice.

Shark fins, easy to store and dry, always fetch a good price. Tiger penis, too, that particular strain of superstition still driving absurd extremes — the story of a wealthy man reportedly eating one of the last wild tigers, purely for its supposed effect.

I steer things toward reef science, bleaching everywhere these days. I point out that without a genuinely global view, localized reports alone just tell you a given spot is damaged, without any real sense of the bigger pattern.

On a geological timescale, oceans and reefs have always shifted — reefs may simply be migrating poleward as temperatures rise, or the biosphere may be quietly selecting for hardier coral genetics on its own. Who knows. Human impact is clearly devastating in the near term, more so for us than for the ocean itself, which will likely outlast the damage, even if it costs a few decades and a few species along the way.

An untended city gets reclaimed fast too — plants, insects, moving in almost immediately.

We function, in a way, as a flag ship ourselves — even data that isn't perfectly suited for formal mapping still stands as a record, a fixed point in space and time for a given reef's condition.

On bleaching specifically, surface temperature data alone should help determine scale and likely cause — satellites already offer that easily enough. What's missing is coordinated teams across different regions, the Maldives, Chagos, and so on, tracking a handful of key indicator species with solid shared communication.

Reefs still aren't treated as any real priority, mostly because so few people ever actually see them, beyond the occasional diver. Diver numbers keep rising each year, sure, but so does the global population — as a percentage of humanity, I doubt real awareness has grown much at all. Maybe even less, given how specialized modern hobbies have become.

Very few divers, honestly, grasp the real scale of the damage — operators naturally steer guests toward the best remaining spots, leaving a rosier impression than the wider reality supports.

So, practically, what can actually be done?

We also, though, have a duty to simply enjoy ourselves. We've been given the single greatest gift there is — a life.

Everyone aboard healthy, and, by any honest comparison to the rest of humanity, genuinely wealthy — even those who'd say otherwise still carry the resources, and the education, to travel freely and find their place wherever they choose to look.

A Note on Return

The log ends here, in Sarawak, not because the voyage did, but because this is where this particular record of it stops. The *Heraclitus* and her crew continued on — through more coastlines, more reefs, more seasons — for years afterward, in the same spirit these pages describe: an open-ended expedition with no fixed date of return, held together less by itinerary than by the people willing to keep showing up for it.

I stayed on. Like the ship herself, and like much of the crew who sailed these pages with me, I continued the voyage well beyond where this particular record closes — the *Heraclitus* never was a vessel built for a single, tidy homecoming, and neither, in the end, were we.

Reading this back now, years later, what stays with me isn't any single passage but the accumulation — the sheer volume of ordinary days that made up something genuinely uncommon. Most of what happens aboard a ship like this never gets written down at all. This is simply the part that did.

Glossary

Beagle

The ship's tender, or small boat, used for diving, shore trips, and towing.

Bio / Biolab

A working and living space aboard the Heraclitus, also used for meetings and screenings.

Comments and observations

A recurring evening ritual in which crew members shared honest reflections on the day, the voyage, or each other.

Lab

A twice-weekly attention and awareness practice observed by the crew, distinct from scientific laboratory work.

Nemo's

The ship's library and quiet common room.

PCRF

The Planetary Coral Reef Foundation, founded in 1991, which chartered the Heraclitus for the Southeast Asia coral reef mapping expedition (1995–2001) this book documents.

RVH / Heraclitus

The RV Heraclitus, an 84-foot, three-masted junk in ferrocement, launched from Oakland, California, in 1975 by the Institute of Ecotechnics. Known informally as the Magic Black Ship.

Sea people

The crew's own term for themselves and their particular, deliberately chosen way of life aboard ship.

Strat / Strat command

A strategy meeting among ship's officers to plan logistics, route, and immediate priorities.

Synesthesia

A multipurpose room aboard ship used for meals, theater, meetings, and communal life generally.

Watches (e.g. “eight-to-twelve”)

Shifts of duty, named for their hours, during which crew members stood deck watch or held the helm.

