

SEA PEOPLE, STILL

Voyage on Board the RV Heraclitus

*Indonesia to the Solomon Islands, January - December
2002*

Michel Lippitsch
Expedition Leader

Copyright © 2026 Michel Lippitsch

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

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.

This book picks up the voyage in January 2002, several months after the Southeast Asian coral reef mapping expedition documented in the author's earlier book, *Expeditions Inner and Outer*, had wound down, and well before the North Pacific crossing that would follow the year after, documented in *Crossing the North Pacific*. In between sits this quieter, less-chronicled year — Komodo and Sulawesi, the traditional sailing canoes of Manus, a tense passage through Bougainville, dry-dock dramas in Rabaul and Madang, the kula ring of the Trobriand Islands, and a difficult return to a Solomon Islands still recovering from civil war. The author served as the expedition's leader throughout, with Eibes as captain for most of the year, and Ferdi taking over the role partway through, in Biak.

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 year; not everyone below sailed the whole way. What follows are the people who appear most often in these pages.

Michel — Expedition leader

Eibes — Captain, until Biak

Ferdi — Mate; captain from Biak onward

Orla — Science coordinator; the author's partner

Reka — Crew member

Priska — Eibes and Reka's daughter, aboard for much of the year

Qamar — Scientific coordinator, early in the year

Carol — Crew member

Claudia — Cook, Komodo through the Trobriand Islands

Carsten — Crew member, Indonesia leg

Eddie — Solomon Islands guide and friend, met in Munda

Stinj — Crew member

Sean — Crew member

Bryan — Crew member

Aurelio — Crew member, Indonesia leg

Mark — Crew member, Indonesia leg

Gaie — Co-founder, Planetary Coral Reef Foundation

Lazer — Chief Operating Officer, Planetary Coral Reef Foundation

Ernie — Trobriand Islands boat captain and guide, met in Losuia

THE VOYAGE ROUTE

Chapter One

Komodo, Indonesia

January 1 - 21, 2002

Chapter Two

Kendari, Sulawesi → Ceram → Waigeo → Biak, Irian
Jaya

January 27 - March 3, 2002

Chapter Three

Manus → Kavieng → Bougainville → Munda → Rabaul →
Madang → Trobriand Islands

May - August 25, 2002

Chapter Four

Simbo → Munda → Honiara → Louisiades → Alotau

October - December 2002

CONTENTS

Chapter One

Komodo, Indonesia — January 1 - 21, 2002

Chapter Two

Kendari, Sulawesi to Biak, Irian Jaya — January 27 - March 3, 2002

Chapter Three

Manus to the Trobriand Islands — May - August 25, 2002

Chapter Four

The Solomon Islands, Again — October - December 2002

Chapter One

Komodo, Indonesia

January 1, 2002

Komodo dragons stroll the beach at Rinca while the beagle races toward the entrance of the strait. We drop in at the edge; the current sweeps past at the speed of light. Even the fish struggle to hold their ground. I find shelter behind a boulder, using the swirl behind it to protect myself. Life is everywhere, busy, busy, no room for the weak here — everyone feeds. The small fish feed on incoming plankton, and the big ones feed on the small fish eating the plankton.

A mad dance. The sea so thoroughly alive. Happy to be here.

Bodies stomping on the red deck, a red flare shot into the sky, a cocktail made from arak brought back from Sarawak, an old, flat, bubbly imitation champagne never touched since last New Year's — but at least the cork still pops, and the now-cultural trademark of RV Heraclitus events, the hug. So everyone hugs, and hugs.

Claudia cooks a great meal, full of her Latin temper and her particular magic — food that actually feeds you. It's the first New Year either Eibes or I can remember celebrating at sea. Maybe a first altogether.

January 2, 2002

Gray sky, open ocean. The atoll of Karang Kapota refuses us entrance, in its way, with the most violent downpour out of an electrified atmosphere. Up on the mast, I hear everyone below laughing and pointing up at me — usually the most secluded spot on the ship, the one

nobody pays attention to, but my hair is standing straight up, forming a kind of halo around my head.

Since landing in Bali, I can only now start putting names to moments.

The days when the sea was illuminated, dolphins riding the bow day and night, reflections and dreams all around, eyes wide open watching and watching the horizon. Then the whales came, blowing all around us. We dived, the ship at anchor in paradise, watching the current run in and out of the channel. A dragon would cruise the beach every morning; Kate spotted him first — I suddenly saw this log moving on the beach.

The diving grew wilder and wilder. On one memorable dive the current raced through the corner of a pass — the thrill of being caught in exactly the right spot. Underwater, there are hot spots, not always the same place twice, where everything seems to happen at once.

Rich, plankton-saturated water didn't help visibility, but it clearly fed life on the reef. Seldom have we seen this much color, vibrance, and diversity on a single reef. A shame not to have it on film or image, though we carried it away in mind and body regardless.

Fishermen came seeking shelter from the weather, but also to fish. A few dove for oyster shells, others caught jacks with nets, though most complained the fish weren't biting right now — and indeed, we saw few pelagics along the reef edge.

Out early one morning hoping to see whales again, we saw plenty of dolphins, but the whales never appeared, save for one distant blow.

Meetings and meetings, solidifying our alliances with each other, knowing full well that clans will form again regardless. Cultures are genuinely fascinating to observe — such a strong behavioral dictator.

Individuals show up here too, at times. Projections. I often end up absorbing blame, put under the loop more than I'd like. Because I don't want to create conflict, I absorb it and move on. But the performance some people put on to conceal and pretend is impressive. Staying mostly silent in my own observations, I don't always appear in control, or on top of things. But I'm watching, feeling, sensing, in an ever more refined school of life — because mistakes here become snowballs fast.

January 10, 2002

A few days out on the beagle now, taking depth transects of the atoll. I usually get towed behind on a rope, filming the reef along cross-atoll transects — sometimes over an hour at a stretch through the same kind of ecological zone, seagrass, say. The atoll is being stripped of every valuable fish species, the reefs patrolled day and night by fishermen. The area has no protection whatsoever. While diving, we heard three bombs go off. Today, trying to buy fish, I see in the hold of a fisherman's boat the state of the catch — exploded eyes, distended bellies. The man's fishing with his son, another generation learning the wrong tricks.

Inside the atoll, the reef looks genuinely sad. It was probably once one of the most majestic places anywhere. Remnants of its old grandeur show here and there, like ruins of some ancient civilization — huge skeletons of the biggest branching acroporas I've ever seen, giant cabbage corals. Now mostly rubble, coated in algae. Here and there, a grand remain still standing. The fish have been gone a while now. Here and there, a lone parrotfish patrols what's left.

There are probably twenty or thirty canoes working this reef on any given day, storing their meager catch in a pen beside two stilt-built huts, a boat coming roughly

once a month to load it all up, bound for Hong Kong and the famous live fish trade.

Qamar talked with the fishermen, and believes them entirely — no, they say, they don't use destructive fishing methods. But my own eyes don't lie. The signs are everywhere. A boat with nothing but the right species of grouper aboard, no bycatch at all, means either they're magicians, or they've cyanided the reef and simply picked their catch clean afterward.

Yesterday we took a breather from the science, diving all day. Orla, Reka, Eibes, Aurelio, Carsten, and I left early to dive the atoll's north entrance, where the reef looks its very best — over ninety-five percent hard coral coverage, genuinely lush. But just to balance our wonder, the sound of bombs going off even in paradise, a reminder of what's actually happening around us.

Then I spot birds and fishing canoes; I take the helm and we go to see. About a mile out, the sea is boiling with life — tuna leaping, feeding on sardines, dolphins feeding too, hundreds of them. I drop into the water, but the dolphins are chasing the fish that the tuna are chasing, the fishermen chasing the tuna, and the birds skimming the surface for whatever jumps clear to escape the attack from below. A magic, hot moment, bursting with life. I'm simply glad to have been born near the top of this particular food chain.

We try trolling a line without luck, and end up buying three tuna straight from a fisherman instead.

The day before, running depth transects, we spotted what I think was a pod of false killer whales mixed with pilot whales — a real treat, surfacing close by, mothers and calves, breaching, full-body jumps clear of the water.

There was a stretch there where everything seemed to go a little wild. People getting sick, burning themselves,

and I lost the brand-new digital camera Orla bought, underwater. I tried recovering it, searched without luck. Then the Nikonos started leaking, though it's still usable. The next thing I know, Eibes has been fiddling with it and it's now thoroughly broken. Something like a conspiracy against our documentation equipment, it starts to feel like.

The energy's strange sometimes, and to my taste we're simply carrying too many people right now. We're losing more than we're gaining at this rate. I need more room to function properly.

January 11, 2002

Everything's grown a little nonlinear lately, the log itself becoming more a collection of timelines and moments grouping themselves as they please.

Today the reef alone was enough to depress me. Simply a reality check on what's actually happening out here.

Aboard, energies run edgier lately, the real faces behind some people's masks starting to show. And I explode too, once in a while.

Two years back, in LA, on our first visit there with Orla, straight off the ship — like missionaries, priests for the ocean, it felt like at the time. It made the ship feel real, especially in a world built specifically for make-believe and fiction. So there we were, entering the gates of that particular tribe, and our currency obviously wasn't money but content, information, maybe inspiration. Like in any drama, people looked at us like some kind of heroes, when really we're just human beings living a life, day to day, that has nothing to do with Indiana Jones or James Bond. And what people wanted to hear, somehow, was always the juicy stuff. I nearly caught myself repeating phrases I genuinely believed, but so deeply ingrained in me by now that saying them felt almost like

announcing the sky is blue. And being in that beautiful house, where more than a few celebrities had already had lunch, lounging decadently by the pool, I realized none of these people had the faintest clue what was actually happening on planet Earth. They've had amazing experiences, of course, just of an entirely different kind — pushing the edges of imagination, art, filmmaking, and a great deal of illusion. In retrospect, I might be the one carrying the most illusions, since the ocean, and what I know of her, feels like part of me — while for that particular tribe, the mechanism of drama, movies, social performance, is simply their medium.

But all very nice people, genuinely.

How far away, and how long ago, those three days of Hollywood glamour already feel. And somehow I wasn't feeling glamorous even then. I feel glamorous when I'm on the ship. Not right now, simply because the ship herself is an amazing ride. People have been getting under my skin far more easily these last ten days than usual — am I losing my tolerance? One thing's certain: I've likely added a few days back to my theoretical, scientifically-proven life expectancy, simply by quitting cigarettes. Averaging twenty to thirty a day, over ten days, that's already three hundred cancer sticks my lungs have been spared. An achievement, at least seen from that particular angle. Orla, despite appearing stronger on the surface than I was, gave in to temptation after only five days. I smelled it on her breath, though she told me herself anyway — she'd probably brushed her teeth, or maybe I just didn't think to kiss her right away. Bad boy.

Orla, my typist at the moment, is refusing to type more than a paragraph at a time, complaining of tiredness, and fairly enough — she has to be up at five to make breakfast. The lazy bum beside her in the library, meanwhile, plans to keep reading a heap of trash and wake up to a fresh cup of coffee, while she's been slaving

away again for these lunatics. Why she does it for him, she doesn't quite know, and of course he doesn't ask himself too many questions either, because — why would he? He doesn't know either, he says, laughing.

But suddenly a noise from the galley distracts him — the two night cooks banging stainless bowls together, pulling him right back on track.

Priska could very well pop her cute little face out of the porthole right about now and say, "That's not funny, that's tragic, I should be crying." She picked the line up from me; memes travel fast aboard. She'll carry the phrase for a few days, and then the novelty will wear off, and she'll find herself a new one. She's wonderful on the beagle these days, thoroughly on task, doing beautifully.

Orla's thirty-third birthday caught me in the galley. I put together a feast. We'd come in early from our science day, caught by a squall, riding out the storm, rain hitting us like sharp needles.

Lunch, or the horrible taste of it, left me grumpy for a few hours, complaining like some old concierge. So I started getting drunk, got Ferdi drunk, got Orla drunk too. Ferdi wasn't hard to convince, since with Carsten aboard, the German trio forms itself daily, drinking and plotting, occasionally letting Reka in, simply because that's her nature, always wanting in on everything.

So I find myself remembering the past, unable to help culturally observing the formation of a group.

German gets spoken a lot aboard right now. At one point Claudia complained about it, though that too is simply in her character — her temper's going to get her in trouble, already has, more than once. I hope she learns to manage it.

Carsten whispered in my ear that he's having an affair right now. Took him a long while to admit it, he says. He's great energy aboard, easygoing, found himself a

comfortable space within the group, able to navigate anywhere.

I find myself a little lost at times, redefining what I'm actually here to do. I know, in principle, but the trouble is that plenty of people carry a pretty fixed idea of what an expedition leader is supposed to be. For me, it's straightforward enough: keep the expedition moving without major incident, holding it all together with the maximum of content, information, and adventure. And seeking, always seeking information, then applying it aboard to keep our own lifestyle and small civilization running, feeding inner and outer both.

It's a very tight balance. Dictatorship, and the particular German sense of order, works — but the trouble with that is people stop thinking, and eventually nobody's feeding on ideas or emotion anymore, since both have been erased from the equation. On the other hand, I always expect people to think for themselves, and usually they don't, and I get misunderstood, and often end up dealing with everyone's projections instead.

I'm often seen as this crazy Frenchman, slightly eccentric. Nobody quite knows who I am.

I'm following the path of the heart, and I take a beating for it sometimes. But it's the only option with any real staying power. The other one is fighting for territory, which I do too, often out of necessity rather than choice.

January 14, 2002

A mellow dive, close to two hours underwater, most of it spent simply watching the comings and goings around one particular bommie. Drawn in at first by clouds of glassy, transparent cardinalfish, I get hooked instead on a game of hide-and-seek with the two resident red groupers — no other big fish permanently here, this is clearly their territory.

A quick escapade to film Orla's favorite triggerfish, and a few garden eels. A great dive.

January 21, 2002

A few days in Kendari now, and the exodus toward different dreams has begun. Qamar and Anne head off to their university worlds; Reka and Priska off to Germany, holding together a complicated set of arrangements as they go; Heather undecided as ever, trying to motivate herself to leave even as she stays busy with the science. The three boys, Mark, Scott, and Aurelio, play the real sailors out in town, drunk and girl-oriented; the girls find their own marks; Claudia drives everyone a little nuts; confrontations here and there; Ferdi and Carsten leave the ship for Germany. Orla does wonderfully, though I swing up and down myself, openings, illusions shattering, trying to cope with it all while holding the fort together. Eibes sits in a kind of limbo, watching his beloved crew leave one by one, holding on tight regardless. We're all learning to see each other clearly.

People are complicated, and also not. Very few genuinely aware people right now, and Eibes's strategy is simply to keep everyone busy, doesn't matter with what.

Kendari strikes me as a dirty-water harbor, though the city itself stays clean. The town is poor; wealth is missing on every front. I can't keep my eyes off the ships passing by, the sheer diversity of design — dugout canoes, pinisi hulls, rusty cargo ships, recycled hulls turned into floating karaoke bars.

Fishermen are still catching, though I honestly can't figure out where. The market's full of fish, though the priced species go straight to wholesalers, exported to Hong Kong, Singapore.

An old man shows up, waiting patiently for a few hours before someone finally lets him aboard. He unfolds a piece of paper — the ship's old brochure, three years old by now. He'd helped tile the bathroom, work that's still holding up fine after all this time.

Chapter Two

Kendari, Sulawesi

January 27, 2002

The birds are frantic, flying and diving over three wooden canoes. As we approach, their gestures shift — a man strikes up conversation right away, while the other two canoes drift a little further up the reef. Two hoses, hooked to an air compressor, plunge into the sea. On the surface, a few dead fish float belly-up — reef fish, Moorish idols, parrotfish.

What happened is the fishermen set off a bomb a few minutes ago.

Two of the boats are scooping up the fish floating on the surface. I put my mask on, leaving Orla alone above. Their faces tell us plainly enough they don't know how to react to us — they know they're doing wrong, and you can feel the tension between hiding it and simply carrying on.

I genuinely want to see what the two men on hookah rigs are doing. I already know, but I want to see it anyway. They cruise fast, picking dead fish off the bottom, netting them. The reef is littered with fish too small to bother collecting — anthias, baby fusiliers, baby parrotfish, damsels. A holocaust.

Surfacing, we drive right up next to the big canoe. I play the innocent tourist who doesn't quite know what's going on, or doesn't care. The dumb, curious tourist. They play their own game right back.

They've caught a fair amount, though all of it small, from one bomb, in a matter of minutes. I feel sad, not angry. They know exactly what they're doing — the innocent

fisherman who doesn't know never really existed. If someone's willing to buy fish, someone's going to catch them that way, and that's the bottom line of the whole problem. This catch will feed a village or two. About eight people were aboard those boats. One leader takes most of the cash, and I doubt any of them make much off it. But at least they caught something.

Earlier, we'd stopped by a sailing canoe just hauling up their net. Not a single fish in it. Their catch for the day: two crabs. Three miles out, no engine, taking a real risk every time they venture out, and they don't even catch fish anymore. How they survive, I honestly don't know. No big fish biting anywhere anymore, the reef thoroughly wrecked — not many options left, is there.

I snorkel around the entrance, two miles out, four miles out, over reefs, or what used to be reefs. The shallows are gone entirely — pure rubble, no live coral, hardly a fish beyond the occasional puffer. Miraculously, a few patches remain here and there, hinting at the sea's former beauty, huge healthy acropora. A few meters further, the rubble desert starts up again. Deeper down it grows more bearable — fish again, batfish, a few Moorish idols, all of them scared stiff the moment I dive down. A short temper, for obvious survival reasons. I spot two lobster forty feet down and leave them be, wishing them a long life. On the surface, everything seems doomed, gone, wrecked, beyond recovery — but you keep digging deeper until you find a layer that offers some hope, and if you dig again and find only more dirt, you dig further still.

In the middle of an atoll, a dozen Bajau boats sit anchored, no sign of life around them — huge double canoes, a house built on one side, net rolled onto a wheel. Some leave a net, or more precisely a pen, holding a few fish, fridge and fresh food together in the same small world. On one boat, a small kid peeks out,

wondering exactly what kind of alien we are, floating past on our black rubber, round-shaped UFO.

These boats belong to another time — a time when the sea was still plentiful, when a man could genuinely live free off the ocean. When all you needed was to dive down, take a clam, eat it, without searching forever to find one. When you could dive for a lobster and have dinner. When you could hook a big fish, dry it, rest a few days, catch enough to trade in town, and carry on. When you could move on, let an area regenerate, and come back to harvest it again.

We're still, at bottom, hunter-gatherers in our blood. How else to explain our own stupidity, our shortsightedness about the future? From a time when you didn't have to worry about having enough for tomorrow.

We learned to farm, learned that a seed needs to sprout first, then grow, before you can harvest. Where did that particular wisdom go?

If you looked at a reef like a garden, with different seeds, harvested at the right time — islanders across the Pacific lived that way for a very long time.

But one day the city got hungry, wanted more fish. As buying power rose, what was once a delicacy for the few became a delicacy for many. It's rarely taste alone that sets the price, but rarity, or difficulty of getting a particular product. Take abalone — nearly gone now. In my chef days, I once bought white truffle, a fragrant mushroom, for over five hundred dollars a kilo. Whole empires were built on spices; wars were fought over them.

Now the wars are at sea, territory fought over just as fiercely — lobster monopolies in the Florida Keys, armadas racing after salmon, trawlers, bluefin tuna hunters. On and on.

We protect the big predators left on land, after nearly exterminating every one of them, in a mad syndrome of "in the end, there can be only one," or simply hunted to prove some idea of manhood. And yes, let's be honest, there's something undeniably appealing about hunting the big beast, braving the fierce dragon, bringing home a trophy to impress and lead the pack. I'm not passing judgment — I take real pride myself in catching a big fish, and genuinely enjoy cooking and eating it too. But there are no natural limits on satisfying whoever holds the power, and money is power, all-powerful as far as I can tell for ninety-eight percent of the world's population — if not dollars, then shells, bracelets, yams. Wealth. Still looking, somewhere, for that imagined paradise where society lives in perfect harmony with its environment and itself. By our nature alone, it seems highly improbable. There's always some structure holding the society of man together.

The search continues, experiments in groups, tribes. You'll always find some form. So can man live without form at all, without going insane? At least we can choose our form, consciously, learning and modeling as we go.

Since my own art is cooking, I tend to reach for it as metaphor. I see the world stuck with too many recipes — everyone using recipes, searching for new recipes, in every field, and it slowly feels like the world runs entirely on recipe now, without anyone actually understanding the underlying art. Aboard, we need recipes too, or procedures, to keep the ship afloat and well. But there are different kinds of teaching. Follow a recipe step by step and you'll rarely fail — not many surprises, but no real improvement either. Or you teach the basics, then let it all synergize, keeping the recipe book to a minimum, creating anew each time. Learn the basic ingredients, then play. Since you never step in the same river twice, no two stews ever taste quite the same.

In the span of a single day we witness nearly every basic fishing technique there is — a striking density of diversity right there: net fishing from a canoe, line fishing with stones, line trolling, net-and-stake fishing using semi-permanent structures, spearfishing, longline fishing, dynamite fishing.

The diversity of boats here is just as remarkable — a long history of sea people on display. Outriggers, dugout canoes, sailing canoes, double-hulled Bajau living platforms, prahus, Bugis pinisis, planked elevated canoes, planked ships, trawlers, cargo fishing boats, ferries, cargo ships, steel-hulled fishing boats in a dozen different designs.

Kendari holds two fish factories and a local wholesale market; boats keep docking every morning.

How many bombs went off today? We witnessed one, and they'd planned to set off another. That's one fishing party. One fisherman, three hundred sixty-five bombs a year — enough, on his own, to destroy a good stretch of reef. How long has he been doing it, five years, ten? How many fishermen use the same method? Do they really have a choice? The economy's down, but the damage from globalization is already done — like handing a child a toy, then snatching it straight back, showing him exactly what he could have without ever showing him how to actually have it.

Give me your fish and your skill, and in exchange you can buy petrol and canned sardines from me, and if you're good, you'll get a plastic bucket thrown in as a bonus. A slight exaggeration, maybe. Not far from the truth, though.

How long before we understand that our own resources are our real wealth? Pseudo-wealth, in gold or banknotes representing power, is quietly taking over life on earth, like some giant monster trading life itself for coins and numbers. Not that there's much I alone can do, except

point out how absurd it is to treat that as some inescapable reality. Can we really call ourselves intelligent?

On the other hand, life will carry on regardless. It won't take even a thousand small bombs to strip the ocean of her seeds of life entirely. All we're really doing is embarking on our own slow suicide mission, unless we get our act together. We can — our adaptability is genuinely remarkable. That we can survive being bombarded day and night with noise, images, chemicals we ingest without thinking — isn't that its own kind of magic already? A few casualties along the way, sure, but on the whole a fairly good success story for a species playing out Darwin's survival of the fittest. We're so fit it's honestly a little frightening.

I come from a culture where I was taught to take my own survival for granted — a kind of giant faith that my country, my society, would simply provide. All I had to do was learn a trade and work. That's it, really: you provide the education, I'll provide the work. And I've had, and still have, a hell of a lot of fun along the way, filled with amazing experience, drama, beauty.

As a kid, though, I was a gatherer — mushrooms, wild blueberries, raspberries, blackberries, wild strawberries sold for pocket money. Instinctively I crafted my own bows and arrows, knew my home territory by heart, every stone, tree, bush. Even twenty years later I can picture exactly how it's changed. Fresh water ran year-round. I helped harvest chestnuts, apples, pears, cherries, strawberries. In the garden: carrots, cabbage, lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers, radishes, every kind of salad green, cauliflower, potatoes, green beans, peas, pumpkins, zucchini, peppers, leeks, onions, garlic. Cows for milk and butter, a bull for meat, goats for cheese, turkeys, chickens.

Now most of the berry bushes are gone, the forest's being cut, goats have replaced most other animals, the cheese is semi-mass-produced, and the garden's tended only by my grandmother, eighty-five years old now.

How different, really, is it for the fisherman who once had every possibility open to him? Now the big fish nearby are depleted, so either he upgrades — a bigger boat, a bigger engine, more fuel, going ever further — or he changes his methods, bombing becoming the only real way left to catch enough in a single go to make it worthwhile. A sad state of affairs, but that's where things stand across much of coastal Indonesia. We saw the same thing happening in the Philippines. There's simply no real enforcement of any law here.

The forest gets cut, replaced by cement. Eibes just got back from Jakarta, having watched the pinisis unloading wood there and taking on cement in return — sailing back out to the outer islands to trade that cement for more wood still.

Where do we actually fit into all this, we sea people aboard the Heraclitus? Can we still call ourselves sea people at all? That's the real challenge. It'll only happen if we're genuinely supported in the quest — raising the flag, shouting, though hardly anyone truly wants to listen. I feel that even aboard, sometimes. So the louder voice learns to tame itself, learning to speak less, but with more impact, at the right time, in the right place. And like all memes, you repeat, repeat, dressed in some new sauce or flavor, but at bottom, repeat. I've watched Johnny do exactly that for five years now. The message stays clear, and it needs saying again, and again, and again.

I've broken bones, taken cuts and bruises, and somehow the body always finds a way to heal itself. Nature works in genuinely miraculous ways — her engineering so remarkable that everything we build is really just a poor

copy of the wonders already around us. But it takes real dreaming, and not small dreams either. Without dreaming of flying like a bird, there would never have been a single plane in the sky. Without dreaming of Mars, we'd never step outside our own small biosphere and expand beyond it. It's our nature to dream, and it's man's particular power to chase those dreams, however ridiculous, insane, or flatly impossible they might seem. That's the real power.

January 29, 2002

Real power is one thing; having to keep demonstrating it is another. Unfortunately, that seems to be a constant struggle. Every day brings a fresh example — the hard psychological, physiological work of leading.

I'm still naive about it, honestly, not thinking much in terms of archetype, almost working against the grain, and having to admit, often, that it doesn't quite work.

La nef des fous — the ship of fools.

The lunatics cross the equator a thousand times over, each with their own particular wish and method. The one who refuses to cross, always left behind in the small boat, climbing back aboard. The one desperate to go first, sparking a small mutiny. The one who sleeps through it every time. The rational one who insists none of it exists, right up until he sees the actual line on the chart. The one with a split personality who shows up as twenty different characters, or actors. The one who doesn't trust the GPS. The one trying to time an orgasm to the crossing itself, failing repeatedly, needing to cross over and over. The special one whose GPS battery happens to die at exactly the wrong moment. The one who simply doesn't see the line at all. The one trying to catch a fish right on the equator mark, circling the globe twice only to realize there's no fish, or no bait left on the hook. The one who wants so badly to be last that

everyone else jumps overboard first, swimming away from the line while the ship drives on alone.

February 6, 2002

Back on the high seas, wind in our sails. A squall just passed; I jump on deck and take the helm. Six point eight knots under sail — the ship is racing. Our first real sailing in a good while.

Orla's fully in control, especially given she's leading two space cadets on her watch — kindergarten, watch part one.

Kendari, despite the smell, the rats running along the docks, no obvious tourist sites or dramatic scenery, the overlooked stepchild of a port, turned out to be genuine magic for the Heraclitus. The weather stayed calm, apart from the occasional downpour, though with barely any wind — and for once that was fine, since the ship became a construction site for three weeks, shipshaping the last thing on anyone's mind.

Five people left the ship during this eighteen-day stop. Qamar and Anne first, back to their lab in Charleston; Reka and Priska to Germany; Heather off to Ireland. Justin Bryant joined us in their place.

Filled with strange events too, the right people arriving at the right time. Roy became the real fixture of our stay in Kendari, arriving right as we did. He wasn't a stranger to the ship — on our last visit here, he'd worked on the heads, laying tile that's still holding fine, not one piece fallen since.

He first came aboard selling fish and coconut. Thirty-two years old, though he looks closer to forty-five — catching fish these days is hard work, he explains, and the sun ages a man fast. He likes to complain, quietly. His teeth were a constant struggle for him; at one point I gave him money and instructions to see a dentist, and he came

back with "obat," medicine instead — clove oil, enough to dull the pain, not fix the underlying problem.

So I started him off with wood from the old Synesthesia floor, to clean and scrape down. That wood originally came aboard from the Amazon rainforest, and it seemed only fair, instead of throwing it out, to save some of the planks — a symbolic gesture, but a meaningful one. Roy came to help with the floor, and became Claudia's best friend along the way. A good pairing — she needed outside help, or she'd have driven the whole crew a little insane with her temper. But he held on, and step by step, the floor reappeared.

Once finished, it genuinely changed the face of the ship. We felt clean, "civilized" again.

We broke in the new floor with an acting class, different kinds of walks, everyone taking a turn as dance teacher for the rest to follow. Then an open stage, re-enacting the floor's own history — not the whole of it, just starting from the tree being cut down. I played the tree, being felled.

Suddenly people appeared. Vera showed up with her magic welder to help.

A great party followed — students, drivers, Roy, Vera and company, a mellow celebration, slides shown in our revamped Synesthesia. It's become a proper living room now, somewhere people genuinely want to sit, talk, simply be.

We spent time too in a different universe entirely: the markets, fish and produce both. The full diversity of South Sulawesi shows itself there — tribes coming down from who knows where to sell their crops, unfamiliar plant species everywhere, many too bitter for our western palates, and we don't always know how to cook them properly.

But for the first time, we got the best cooking lesson of the whole voyage. Having dinner with Vera at her house, we played a small game of cat-and-mouse over when we'd finally cook together. She wanted to teach us traditional banana cake, and *cumi cumi* curry, squid curry — not a single processed ingredient in sight, watching raw product transform into pure delight, not even a chicken stock involved. A lesson too in cleanliness, from a rich culture, the Buginese of Makassar, the recipe handed down from her own mother — real sea-people food, every ingredient built to keep well at sea. And finally, real light shed on the mystery of blending spices — the key factor, always, being the ratio between them, then frying the paste, pressing the coconut milk by hand. A genuine passing-on of knowledge, the best gift we could have asked for.

Everyone got frantic with work — every area of the ship got some kind of boost, even a single new lashing seemed to get extra energy poured into it. The bosun's locker got new shelves, and we narrowly escaped a small fire down there — smoke rising from a fire extinguisher, up through the hatch. Climbing down felt like descending into hell, more scare than harm in the end.

Mark needed to run to Jakarta and Singapore to renew visas and collect our charts for Biak, though he left the charts behind at the airport in Jakarta. One of the water-taxi drivers found them at the very last minute, just before we cast off from the dock.

Plenty of boats come through this port and simply can't leave again, for one reason or another — funds, usually. Kendari's littered with the skeletons of old ships, like a cemetery. The retired ones get repurposed as floating karaoke bars, still keeping company with drunken sailors singing their hearts out.

But the sea's welcomed us back again.

February 7, 2002

Two days now, and I've been playing like a kid with a magical sea. Bioluminescence lights up at night, a jellyfish-and-plankton soup igniting the moment a beam of light strikes it — though it takes some experimenting to get the best effect. Sharp, round movements work best. Torch in one hand, I play painter in the dark, stroke after stroke, unable to stop.

Aurelio takes over the torch-brush, and we cut the navigation lights entirely. I climb the shrouds to watch the whole spectacle. Internally I laugh, a happy kid, every muscle in my face gone loose, wearing that particular funny, stupid grin you get when you're stoned, or simply high on something else entirely.

The wind's finally from the right direction — we're sailing. Ceram, a hundred sixty miles off.

Ceram, Banda Sea, Indonesia

February 9, 2002

The night watches keep reporting strange things in the sky. I push them to gather their thoughts, write down what they actually saw. The island of Buru sits nearby, off-limits to all boats under the pretense of being a penal colony. Two days now of strange sightings.

February 10, 2002

Wake with the sun, only to sink back into dreams — what you're seeking is also seeking you.

Dolphins all around, a huge pod of spinners, a few spins, a double backflip, something like an invitation. We lower the small boat and, with Orla, Megan, Claudia, Carol, and Justin, set off after them. I trail behind on a rope

with the camera, though I rather wish I hadn't bothered — dirt on the lens later means the shots never quite focus. But the magic's alive regardless, and everyone gets their turn in the water.

Everyone comes back smiling, nearly everyone, and one thing's certain — it always lands like a boost of energy, and always at exactly the right time. Right time, right place, and knowing you're actually there.

We spot three leatherback turtles too, huge ones. The sea boils with fish all around us, the shore thick with jungle, abundance pressing in from every side. A genuine hot spot.

February 12, 2002

We climb a tree, an outlook over the canopy, birds everywhere — a reef in the air, it feels like, the same three-dimensional density, the same diversity, that same quick sense of being exactly where you're meant to be.

A cave day too. Breathing the forest. Mandy in the village.

The social heart of the village centers on a huge pool, fed by a freshwater river running out to sea. Everyone gathers there — the old men in the corner, conspiring, eyes wide open, kids splashing everywhere around them.

February 14, 2002

A mess again — an infection in my eyes, nailing me down to bed. An inner expedition instead.

February 15, 2002

A totally mad dive — one of those dives that makes you want to kiss the sky, that screams there's still magic out

there, whatever the doomed picture I've been painting for most of you. A dive that spells wild, genuinely wild. Nothing tame about it, and I honestly can't understand how there can be this much fish — so thick you can barely see the water. And then, circling, curious, a huge manta ray, saying hello, entirely unafraid, passing over our heads again and again.

The current's strong, over two knots, but every fish in the book schools here, like a giant city, a superpolis where everyone comes to shop. The reef fish are big — groupers, filefish, trumpetfish, fusiliers raining endlessly down the slope, and I honestly can't work out how this much fish fits in one place. Jacks cruise constantly, small and large, schools of rainbow runners in the blue, unicornfish, every kind of surgeonfish imaginable.

We're in the Dampier Strait, on a submerged reef, fifteen feet down. The whole sea around us is boiling with fish. A king mackerel shoots straight for the sky after a sardine. Frigate birds dive here and there. A huge splash in the distance — probably more manta rays.

The crossroads to the Pacific, and the warmest possible welcome back. Genuinely nice to feel welcomed.

Sunset with dolphins, three of them, breathing out, moving toward the sun.

February 19, 2002

Waigeo is as wild as wild gets. We've entered Oceania now, the last frontier, where almost no one goes — pristine jungle, a few villages scattered here and there. The most impressive stretch of wilderness I've ever traveled through, a gorgeous bay, birds everywhere, the kind of picture-postcard scene Bali paints over and over, cockatoos, hornbills, their noisy flight like something out of a different era.

Pink dolphins, a fish frenzy, birds thick as a cloud diving down, terns under attack from frigate birds, sandcastles on a beach.

February 20, 2002

Full to the brim with impressions, enough for a good long while. A craving for nature genuinely satisfied, energy free now to redirect elsewhere.

February 23, 2002

Time's grown strange lately, my mind operating on different timelines at once, it seems, intermingling, genuinely synergizing — or maybe I'm simply becoming aware of it now.

Dolphins are ever-present, sometimes in schools a hundred strong leaving Waigeo, the pink dolphins teaching us a different breath, a different tempo. Two dolphins surfacing as the sun sets, Eibes and I watching ourselves drift into the Pacific. The swim with half the crew, a kind of passage for them. The constant breath at night in Ceram. A whale's blow on watch. The visits during every Sunday dinner. Bioluminescent trails at night.

There's a whole thread here on human behavior, the ever-watching eye over power and how people relate to it, different methods, different views on leadership. I've been reading Desmond Morris, **The Human Zoo**, and can't help but see the same patterns everywhere now.

An ongoing struggle, since it deals mostly with the subconscious, and few people, if any, are actually watching for it that way. I'm essentially watching us, interacting with each other.

Running the acting classes has become more and more a real learning platform, and I've shifted from watching

almost exclusively myself to watching everyone. Alongside the acting, some real study of biology is necessary too, to understand what's actually happening in the body. Molding — beyond simply breaking up blocks or loosening tension — activates the whole nervous system, what we call sensitive energy. No real magic to it, just simple physiology, glands releasing their chemicals and hormones. Voices becoming birds, becoming orchestras, and somehow every class ends in comments and observations. Good.

Thursday night, Robert Anton Wilson, *Prometheus Rising* — a genuinely challenging subject, good discussion.

We're privileged to experience nature at something close to her grandest, without days of trekking through jungle to earn it. A taste of the wild, even if the true wild of a century ago is long since gone. Reading passages of Wallace while in Waigeo feels like time travel. We're lucky, at least, not to have to shoot birds all day, skin them, package them for London. It took him five years of work. The naturalists were the real explorers of their age, and the two of them, Darwin and Wallace, would go on to change forever how the West looks at evolution. It seems obvious now, in hindsight.

Where there's still real study to be done is on the timescale of evolution itself. We might find out sooner than expected just how fast real change can happen. Man's a perfect specimen to examine in close detail. And here and there you find individuals, the odd, weird cats who decide to defy the odds, go with the flow instead. A tree grows outward toward the sun until it's satisfied, can't grow much further, but keeps reaching anyway, content and happy, continuously regenerating, leaves falling, feeding itself in part. Life finds a crack wherever it can, and keeps going, and going.

We hear, with ever-rising outrage, that man is destroying life. But man isn't destroying life, exactly — he's simply a greedy creature that got there first, taking as much as he can, growing in numbers that defy the odds of his own survival, endlessly ingenious at building, playing with things, creating needs and then satisfying them, but still blind as a bat when it comes to seeing the consequences of his own actions. Very much asleep — so asleep it becomes genuinely frightening. The people at the helm are often the most asleep of all. So how can we possibly steer well? And still, alongside it all, there's a beautiful, mad evolution happening within man too — a diversity of thought nobody could have dreamed of a century ago. The mind stays in perpetual voyage, discovering itself, and the real explorers of the twenty-first century are the ones brave enough to explore man's own inner life. Many pay a high price for it, but they carry humankind forward into its own discovery — man becoming conscious.

What does that even mean, man becoming conscious? Seeing himself in the most intricate detail — sensing his own nerves, recognizing his own emotions. Or maybe evolution's simply handling the basics, freeing us up to focus on what actually needs our attention.

We watched *2001: A Space Odyssey* while part of the crew was busy watching UFOs in the sky over Buru and off Ceram. The people of Ceram are said to hold real magic, able to fly at night. The island of Buru's supposedly been a penal colony forever, sealed off now as a military zone. I'm not pushing any conspiracy here, just stating what happened — Marie-Thérèse has been asking me about the sightings herself. It's the most unlikely, most skeptical people aboard who witnessed them.

Reading about biochemistry, the arrangement of molecules, these strange building blocks that, in the right combination, create the machine that we actually

are. Thoughts must carry some material value, an electrical impulse or something like it, a kind of life of their own. Johnny refers to memes, units of information — traveling from mind to mind, not unlike viruses, implanting themselves in the brain, affecting how it functions. One of the most powerful memes of all: the meme of god.

So as the nervous system organizes itself to run the body's various parts, man, consciously or not, builds his own particular combination. Some combinations work well in particular situations, built to perform a certain task. The biospherians were programmed, in a sense, to function a certain way to accomplish what needed doing. But the truly important, almost magical, humanitarian fact is that Johnny wanted conscious man — or at least wanted the tools for staying conscious built right into Biosphere 2. For that reason, more than any other, the creating team took the brunt of the criticism.

Back to combinations — proteins, these unbelievably complex molecules, nearly indescribable in their arrangement, took scientists decades just to decode, with still no real clue how or why they actually operate the way they do.

We juggle thoughts, facts, words, ideas, building combinations, networks of networks of networks. Once in a while we strike something big, briefly "one with all," then fall back to networks of networks at best, or simply words.

A single chemical compound can alter and reshape our whole perception — a good reminder of what reality actually is. Not this, not this, not this. At a certain point even the word "reality" starts to sound funny.

I know a man who's gone to genuinely great lengths trying to identify exactly what reality is. He's the only person I know who's dedicated quite this much time to it. He's set himself the task of waking people up — not that

he always succeeds, or always uses the right method, but he does it with the highest possible aim, an honor to mankind.

We're sailing now in the swells of the Pacific, a new ocean, a strong one. The swells roll, the ship's happy, sail full of wind, riding the current at 7.2 knots. A delight. Every sound turns to music; any note off-beat gets heard immediately.

The sky seems more radiant somehow, a new kind of light.

Orla gave a wonderful talk on her ten favorite facts about the Pacific Ocean, including the wild theory that the moon is actually the crater now holding the whole ocean.

Dinners stay nice, though the same old pattern sets in — a handful doing all the talking, a few staying silent. A shame, but I've watched it happen since the day I first stepped aboard. After a while, something like a public face emerges, and you start to see the dreams, sometimes the delusions, or simply the advertising panel standing in for a real personality.

February 24, 2002

Happy birthday, Heraclitus. Unfortunately the energy's not especially high, despite all the wonders we've seen these past weeks. We sail the bay around Biak, approached by locals who assumed we must be in some kind of trouble.

A lazy day. Eibes and I dive into the blue, get pleasantly lost following a sea snake.

Biak, Irian Jaya, Indonesia

February 25, 2002

Biak — mad, great, and utterly different. We're properly in Oceania now, and the feel is Melanesian, a wholly different human landscape, sharp and obvious. The market's wonderful, communication's easy enough, and apart from the political undercurrents, everything seems fine on the surface. I call a meeting to regroup and defuse some energy that's been building toward a possible explosion, put Claudia gently back in her place, and for now everything's under control, at least until the next time.

Eibes is leaving. Ferdi's stepping into the role of captain, and I'm preparing the ground so the transition goes as smoothly as it can. We're closing a chapter here. Our passage from Kendari has been genuinely epic — just enough drama to keep it interesting, mellow enough to keep our own sense of wonder fully alive.

I often feel like the youngest person aboard, and it's a real effort, sometimes, cranking the energy machine back up.

March 2, 2002

Within the hour we raise the small boat, the anchor, in mad swells and a two-knot current, raise three sails, engine off, cruising at seven knots.

Everyone performed beautifully as a team — I was genuinely surprised myself. The tempo, for once, was exactly right.

Biak's been an incredible stop, though never quite welcomed by the local authorities — the real puzzle of what's actually happening here unfolded slowly, day by day. The "Biak people" all feel, in one way or another,

that they live under colonization from the Indonesian government. A bit of history helped, gathered from various sources — one an old Dutch man on a nostalgia tour of West Papua, a soldier here in the sixties. Another from a group of conservation workers, genuinely using the concept to make contact with the West.

March 3, 2002

Still sailing with today's wind, Pacific swells, the wind five points behind the beam. We peak at 8.5 knots — perfect sailing.

Chapter Three

Manus to the Trobriand Islands

May 2002

My hand becomes one with the paddle, raising or lowering it to hold our course. The sail's full, full of westerly wind. Facing into it, the outrigger slices through the water — the canoe becomes an extension of myself, my whole body answering the element, real symbiosis. I know I'm wearing a big smile. We're racing at fifteen knots, silently, effortlessly, just the rush of water caressing the hull. The tip of Pitilu Island is my mark, sailing toward the entrance of Seeadler Harbour, on Manus Island's north side.

I owe this privilege to the people of Pere village, on the south coast — Poke especially, who agreed to sail the canoe over to the Heraclitus, an eight-hour trip. Everything happened in those eight hours. We caught fish, broke a mast, swam with dolphins, but more than anything, learned how to actually sail a traditional canoe — and, once again, the simple fact that it takes an ensemble to achieve anything at all.

Echuca Patch, off Kavieng, New Ireland

A marlin's just caught a huge needlefish, still shaking. A shark hunts through the middle of a giant school of fusiliers. A two-meter mackerel passes along the reef edge. Two huge groupers lead the way, rainbow runners, barracuda, a school of oceanic triggerfish zooming by. On the reef itself, schools of yellow snapper, two-dot snapper hanging in the current — all of it under the melody of dolphin song, growing louder and louder. Echuca Patch delivers a genuine moment.

The duk duk are dancing. I stand close to the musicians, playing their guts out. They've come from the forest to help the current governor campaign for his seat, though the duk duk itself is still serious business — still part of a men's secret society, where one has to live three weeks in the jungle on a special diet, fasting three days, just to earn a place in the circle. The energy builds between the musicians and the two dancers. Suddenly I'm thrown right into that spot with my camera, the duk duk finishing his dance and leaping clean over me to land on the musician. A giant rush passes through my body like a blow — everything sparkles, my nervous system alive from head to toe. Magic.

During a transect dive, once the three lines are filmed, I become a hunter instead — spear gun in hand, I catch three lobster, then turn alchemist, transforming them into a feast.

The wind picks up, forty knots. Every sense alive. The sheets tangle; full force on the line. Orders come sharp, directing while the hands work the rope. The body takes over automatically, every gesture a small work of art. We take the storm on the port side, underwater at times, but the ship handles it beautifully — riding it out with real elegance and strength. She's amazingly powerful, unique, trustworthy.

Election time in Papua New Guinea, the mechanics of culture laid bare.

For two hours they play the bow. I lose all sense of time; Aurelio has to remind me afterward how long my body stayed arched, mere centimeters from the blows. My voice whistles, as if trying to talk to them directly. I narrow my attention from my forehead down to the water, a thin thread, following the bioluminescent trail. I needed that — an injection of pure energy.

I collapse in Nemo's, a cold invading my body, rushing to every part, all the way to my fingertips. I trace its

progress, let my body relax, surrendering rather than fighting. My system's already fighting an infection in my right foot. A kind of high, in the surrender itself. I could probably find the strength to move, but it would only mean dealing with it later instead. I let everything rest, let the body do what it needs to do. Dreams stay vivid, always caught between waking and dreaming, ship noises pulling me out, like jumping between two worlds — strange timing, with science and theater both in full swing. But the body says stop. In the end, he's the boss; I rely on him to keep me going.

Everything rushes to my head, sinuses clogged, chest heavy, energy busy fighting the invasion. The strategy pays off — by midnight my head clears, enough even to give a boost to the last breath of theater rehearsal.

May 16, 2002

The sea, by some strange call — did the sky hear my wish on last night's shooting star, or my own voice calling the weather down through visualization? I'll never really know. The sea is calm; the wind, for once, is with us. Too strange to make sense of, too good not to laugh about.

Fins in the distance, starboard side. We turn ten degrees, hold a parallel course. The sea's glassy. A pod of melon-headed whales rides the bow, pointed fins and sharp heads in full view — the only two signs distinguishing them from pygmy killer whales. Six of them ride at once. We're slow, three and a half knots. They're traveling alongside a pod of about thirty rough-toothed dolphins. For the next hour, a genuine festival of grace. They show us exactly what it means to be together, ensemble in its purest essence — uninhibited touch and caress, looking straight through our eyes, vocalizing like sirens calling sailors to join them.

Green Island, May 2002

Dive, dive, dive. Few places command the kind of respect the two entrances to Green Island's lagoon do. Nature in her wildest dress, performing her wildest dance.

Current flows in, carrying fresh nutrients from the open sea. Dolphins ride our bow wave. Thirty feet below, a drop-off falling toward infinity. Schools of tuna race out of the lagoon at the speed of light. Trevally, in huge schools, block the view to the blue, moving together in something at once chaotic and perfectly organized — like galaxies, universes, the motion strangely familiar, inner and outer both, the laws of nature performing their own art of life.

Sharks — two-meter sharks race up from the depths to inspect the intruder. Respect. My body takes the shape and contour of the wall, breath silent, eyes wide with admiration. Fear tingles somewhere close, but gets synergetically absorbed into beauty, only sharpening her majesty. More sharks, many more sharks.

Unicornfish flash electric blue against the darkening underwater blue that only comes as the sun starts to set — colors only your own eyes can do justice, no photograph will ever quite reproduce them. We'll dive this spot over and over, and it'll offer new gifts every single time.

A formation of four eagle rays glides past, unafraid, as long as you stay motionless and exhale your bubbles silently. They glide along the wall's edge, almost in slow motion. A silvertip shark comes closer, and closer — too close for real comfort, and again that admiration for the sheer perfection of nature's will. Squadrons of barracuda patrol the reef, snappers and sweetlips schooling in formation, raining endlessly down the slope. A three-meter nurse shark hides, current running through its gills.

More sharks patrol the reef — baby reef sharks, bold, curious, fearless.

Space again, planets, fish-planets. A shower of trevally-asteroids coming straight at you, no collision, a small miracle, diverting course at the very last second. A spaceship eagle ray passes overhead. A galaxy of barracuda circles.

In evolutionary terms, we're about as close to being in space as we're likely to get. With our tank, BC, regulator, we become biomechanical man, unified with our own machinery, each depending on the other. We've lived with this particular trend in evolution since we were born, at least in this century.

I once met a mad, visionary painter, H. R. Giger. He painted biomechanical beings, his style dark, laced with humor but tinted always with something darker. He built a whole world vision of his own, shaping, predesigning at least part of some future strand of man's evolution. It took hold in Japan — futuristic dream, or nightmare? I started seeing his visions everywhere, in leaves, in patterns, in abstract painting, though it always felt a little too dark for me, the wrong call somehow. Still, I understood its suggestive power. He didn't just paint pictures from his own mind — he embedded a real projection of some possible human future.

Now the trend feels clearer, stepped out of that disturbing dark style entirely, biomechanics becoming a genuine reality, whether we care to acknowledge it or not. Vitamins, television, cars, houses, chemicals, virtual reality, computers. We're pushing the boundaries of what reality even is. Reality isn't static — reality is as much as you can be, at any time, anywhere.

There are others, just as mad, just as visionary, only a little less dark. Riding into the unknown is itself a way of learning. As Buckminster Fuller put it, you cannot learn less. So in this particular evolutionary fact, one frontier

keeps stretching further — world man, leading toward planetary man, universal man.

Six kingdoms, one for humanity — poetry entering science. In the madness of classification, man is, after all, just a sophisticated ape. Yes, but a very sophisticated one. Regardless of where he lands in the classification scheme, man's achievements stand entirely on their own.

For a long time I looked down on man, endlessly fascinated by animals instead. But I needed to go through my own evolutionary process first. I collected insects as far back as I can remember, kept in matchboxes. Then mushrooms, though they never kept, so I could only mount tiny exhibitions at school. Fruit I collected too, selling it to buy books on underwater subjects — my own little one-man factory. Then I got interested in tools, hunting tools — bow, arrows, knives, spears — never just weapons, always art pieces too, carved and decorated, though I never sculpted purely for sculpture's sake, only to render a tool more beautiful.

Then it becomes a ride through your own senses — sound, touch, taste.

I owe to a man named Johnny my whole appreciation for the human being — for being able to recognize myself as a man evolving, watching myself evolve. The biggest gift of all.

Full moon bright,

breeze on light,

waves in tempo, song,

bodies asleep, dreaming, positions curled, straight,
some heavy, some light,

Colombara's volcano cone exposed to the stars,

a few birds that can't sleep,

a rooster out of time.

Crew missing their senses, epoxy paint spilled in the
bosun's locker,

kerosene leaking in the galley,

a kid crying,

but the songs remain, in body and mind,

the perfect dance gesture, fresh in memory.

May 16, 2002 (continued)

We should have arrived in Gizo by now. The key wrong word here is *should*.

Anchored between Buka and Bougainville, sheltered from swells and wind, after four days of pounding, going nowhere.

Parrels on the mainsail shredded, the snotter on its last thread, and, to crown it all, a snapped turnbuckle. We're playing against the sea, and we are not winning.

Deadlines, politics, pressure to arrive — we chose not to listen to the signs. We heard them well enough; we simply didn't listen. Too arrogant, too sure of ourselves. We're taught, again and again, to take a proper look at the ocean first. We're not built, by ethics any more than by technics, to go against her.

I pulled a muscle in my back — crippled again, frustrated by my own reaction to it. I'm calling every shot now, though they don't come out of my mouth in public — I let the captain deliver them instead.

We have very few real choices left. At this rate, even four full tanks of diesel wouldn't get us there. And we're only three hundred miles off — three hours by car, if a road existed to take us there. But current and wind decided to stop us cold.

Bow pounding, waves crashing, rivers of salt rushing down the deck. Snap — a parrel on the mainsail breaks. Another, then another. The snotter's chafing straight through, no escape, the sea is against us. No — we are against the sea, we've chosen this battle. The sail rocks back and forth, but with it down, we go nearly backward. A shroud pops loose, dangling like a length of soft rope. We lower sails, fast. My back gives too. We turn toward land, looking for any shelter.

A no-win situation. Burning fuel to go nowhere. Gizo, our actual destination, impossible to reach with what we have left.

The moment we anchor, the ship finally takes a deep breath. So does the crew. A real tension releases.

But we're in paradise only in appearance. The place is wild — dolphins surface, off to hunt for the night. Wind passes over the island. We're anchored between Buka and Bougainville, a place under near-constant civil war for two decades now. The Papua government's withdrawn entirely, leaving the place with no infrastructure — no post office, no phone, no bank. Back into the wild.

A boat comes close, a loud-mouthed man aboard, keen to show his authority, a tone picked up somewhere between tribal clan tradition and one too many Hollywood war movies. Crippled but standing my ground, I face him. He's playing his game a little too far. Erect as a rod, voice sharp and clear, I hold my position. The crew and captain, lost, at the mercy of a puffed-up official. I act — this is acting, not reacting, protecting our own tribe, our people. Everything eases, becomes a give-and-take, a ping-pong game whose outcome was already settled — no real winner or loser here.

The wind's dropped now. It looks like the elements are letting us carry on toward our original plan.

Space — we're already in space, right here on our own blue planet. But explorers we are, to the very core of our being, and everything conspires to stop the explorer, competition at every edge.

Munda, Solomon Islands, Western Province

May 23–26, 2002

A hundred years ago, the first missionaries came ashore at Munda, into a land of fierce headhunting tribes.

We catch the plane early, six in the morning, before daybreak, flying low enough to see every island, atoll, and reef around us. We land in Munda not knowing much of anything, following the flow — the direction of the human current is clear enough, so we simply follow the marching bodies.

The road takes us through the village along the shore, people bathing in coral-carved pools at the water's edge. The plants are healthy, orchids in the trees, the scent of recent rain. The sea sits like a mirror to the sky, every canoe pulled up in the shade, away from the beating sun.

We take in the place, end up sitting in two bamboo chairs sipping coffee. A few men have rigged a shack from tin and leaves — a mini-store selling cigarettes, tinned tuna, food, cold coconut on ice — and, in the middle of nowhere, a computer with internet access.

Then we meet Eddie. A strange synchronicity, the sense of being exactly where we're meant to be. His eyes are beaming; at first neither of our bodies quite knows how to react, but the ice breaks fast. He'll come out to the ship on Monday.

A performance dramatizing "marooning," from the height of the slave trade — Solomon Islanders lured aboard ships bound for Fiji. The acting captures it well,

though it runs long, and we head back to base camp before it finishes.

We're given a room fifteen minutes away. I go to bathe in a dug-out freshwater pool, carved during the Second World War as an American landing spot. The historian traveling with the National Geographic film crew believes holding this position was decisive — once the Americans took Guadalcanal and Munda both, they had a clean, unbroken supply line all the way up through Rabaul in Papua, Kavieng, Manus, the Philippines, and on to Japan itself.

The house we're staying in is gorgeous, a lush garden out front, owned by a woman who runs the crew of Solomon women cleaning fish at the local tuna cannery. She gives us a full rundown later — during the last coup, while we were still here, the factory shut down, the Japanese selling off their share. It was the first industry to reopen, starting again from zero. At its height, the operation employed over five thousand people, running fifty ships around the clock. Now they operate with a skeleton crew of a thousand and ten ships. I remember watching the frantic activity of Japanese staff packing up during our last visit, refueling as they went.

June 1, 2002

Being human — a process, evolving. Culturally bound, a social being, traveling the world, inner and outer both. I've never met two human beings, just the two of them alone, who genuinely sought conflict. It takes three to tango. Two beings alone won't fight, simply because there's nothing there to fight about.

I'm a citizen of the biosphere, of planet ocean. The country I was born into built its foundations in a way that doesn't really allow for certain ways of being. I couldn't live off a beach, fishing, living straight off the land — it isn't really a possibility anymore, not where I come from.

A few places still exist, far off, remote islands in the Solomons, or deep in the jungle, and even there.

I'm a man, and I still don't fully know what that means. Navigating through a web, seeking out places where one can simply be. Liberated spaces? And for those, you have to fight sometimes, and for those, you sometimes have to hide, run, run as fast as you can, because if you stop, you'll be caught. The irony of running just to stay free. Even by the concept itself, I might end up caught by my own particular sense of freedom.

But I'm trying to stand, if I can. I know I want to, and how strong that will actually is, I'm still discovering — stretching it, strengthening it. Utopia, no small dream. I will die, and I know that as a certainty. I am alive, and I know that too, as a certainty. The gift of life, and the ongoing effort to find her a meaning. She might not have one, beyond simply existing to exist — like a gift, an ecstasy, a bliss. And that, in itself, might be meaning enough.

We played with our hands today, dancing hands, steering the air, building geometric structures, painting with the invisible, and somehow the invisible turns visible. We play with the hand before we ever reach for a tool — pure enjoyment, information pouring in, touch, surface, texture, heat, memory. None of it new, and at the same time all of it endlessly new. Always reborn, but carrying a memory. Interacting with the world as though it's always new, but carrying a memory regardless. That acting class simply reactivated our hands, retracing the connection, breaking the pattern to break through, to seek out — not the hands and fingers of a monkey, but the hand of man, the hand of a man without culture. Experience.

I am nothing, on the scale of the universe — but that's only true on the scale of size. I am unique, as every man on earth is unique. Some seek wealth in experience,

evolving beyond, but never above, that strange, miraculous, complex system that I am, simply being with the world.

Rabaul, New Britain

July 2002

Rabaul, and the volcano, real volcanoes, puffing smoke like a lit cigar, maybe some spirit still partying in the magma. Back in 1995 they partied hard enough to bury the whole town, burying what was once one of the real jewels of the Pacific. A place of music and creativity once, though maybe it lost the plot somewhere, got the spirit mad enough to want to hear the wind again, once in a while.

We're hearing the wind now, and right now it's the very last thing we want to hear. We've waited eight days for a chance to slip the ship and fix our cutlass bearing, protecting shaft and prop.

Something like a conspiracy in the air — I won't call up the spirits just yet, though they must surely be part of this particular drama. After the slip gets extended, the tree cut for the block from the jungle, the cable that snapped and got spliced back together, the block that broke, the shackle that snapped clean in two, the wheels that came off the rail, and, best of all, an invasion of volcanic pumice from the last eruption, carried in on wind and wave, covering the rails in stone — more absurd than the wildest Hollywood script could have dreamed up. And here we sit, anchored, waiting for our chance to slip. Dealing with the circumstances given, all right.

Every minute holds a possible change of plan, and even though change is the only real constant, a break from the weather would be genuinely welcome.

We called on the weather to bring us here, on a magical voyage of wind and sail, dolphins and whales, emotion and meditation, sailfish on the hook, tuna in the belly, conversation in the head, the ship in the body, laughter to lighten the mood — waiting for wind, riding with wind, we are free. And here we are again, at the mercy of the elements. We're not in control; the elements are controlling us. However much we like to imagine braving the biosphere, we're reminded again and again that we need to follow her breath, her own beat.

Words flow, ideas, plots — we keep learning. We realize, or think we do, that we're here for a reason, or reasons yet to fully manifest in body and mind.

Expeditions inner and outer — we keep toasting them on Sundays, and they are exactly that, these mantras of our own small civilization becoming mind-saving memes. In doubt, two choices: stay still and observe, or keep the body moving through the task. Always hold a direction, even if that direction runs inward, outward, all around at once.

July 15, 2002

Rabaul's behind us now, on our way to Madang.

We battled through an absurd drama just getting the ship out of the water there, only barely succeeding in keeping her alive. We came close to the edge, the elements both with and against us in a dance of madness, strength, solidarity, a genuine game of patience, waiting for a moment that never seemed to come, though at first we failed even to recognize it, fighting to the very last, waiting for our chance to slip.

Now we're north of New Britain, again at the elements' mercy, again caught in that particular, tricky feeling of waiting. The wind won't meet us; the current, which should have carried us to Madang in no time, runs

against us instead. What to do, what to do — a new phrase of Laser's, steadily gaining popularity.

The sea stays serene, changing her face daily, and the only real sanity lies in accepting we can't do more than we're already doing — enjoy the moment, while everything else conspires to make you feel otherwise.

Gaie and Laser are already in Madang, waiting for us in two days, and we haven't covered a fifth of the voyage yet. Three hundred sixty miles still to go.

The voyage opened with a real nature show — the sea boiling with feeding tuna, huge ones, foam everywhere, not from rough seas but from a genuine feeding frenzy. We didn't catch a single one.

Dolphins came to escort us, a blessing on the voyage. I lower myself into the water, hand gripping the bobstay chain, losing all sense of time, though not of space. The dolphins come close, parading past one by one to inspect this particular alien. A baby comes to play; I can feel his sound echolocating all over my body. There's nothing I like better than hanging there, part of some crazy, non-human family, though they always remind me of our own sea-people dream — so thoroughly together, synchronized with each other, and still each carrying a distinct personality. My body becomes one with the sea and the ship both, a real symbiosis. Here, I am free — again, not in time, but in space. Time simply doesn't exist right now.

After waiting for wind, we finally got it — got it right, in fact. Increasing swells, the sea building and building, waves rising higher and higher. No room for mistakes here, different swells meeting us, crashing on bow and stern simultaneously. We rig safety ropes; the ship is cruising. I take the helm for three hours, over ten knots, madly exciting — I am fucking alive. The ship speaks through the waves, the wind at forty knots scouring everything but salt.

The wind suddenly drops, like magic, and a shroud pops — disaster. Quickly, very quickly, we change the bolt, gestures precise, the clock ticking. The moment we finish, the wind picks back up. We close on the strait, the waves piling closer and closer together. The ship handles it beautifully; I kiss the deck, just to let her know.

My voice stays sharp, loud, clear. Often I mumble, but not now — everything comes out clean.

We pass between two islands, crowned with volcano cones reaching for the sky. The sea boils with fish, the sky crowded with birds, frigates, terns. The moment the island's shelter disappears, the swells and waves are back on us.

We get lucky — I jump on the helm, try to sail with the wind behind the beam. The ship doesn't want to turn; it takes precise sail trim to bring her around, and we race at over ten knots, no real chance to stop now, the only way through directly between the two islands.

We're going too fast. We tack, once with the ropes catching, acrobatic maneuvers, swinging out on the rigging. A boat comes close, nearly too close. We're all fighting for our own survival here. No fear exactly, but I know we can't afford any slack now. The few minutes spent lying flat land with full force.

Life at its fullest — when you know exactly what you've got. Without the threat of falling, we wouldn't dance at all. And we are dancing, madly dancing, dancing life itself.

Madang

Greeted by dolphins again, bottlenose this time. Once more I'm in the water, completing some kind of circle. They come close, looking us each in the eye, right beside

me, forgetting the bow wave entirely to come investigate this alien from the land.

We enter the harbor, swinging through the swells. I stand in the crow's nest, holding my balance, mostly watching for reefs and current. The land's washed out to sea in one spot, forming a pale patch mid-ocean — I mistake it, briefly, for a reef.

Gaie and Laser greet us at the entrance and pilot us to our dock. Hurry, set the tires, the ropes. Meanwhile I spot a dugong, just diving down.

Docked, and dry dock is on. Laser takes charge, masterfully, in his own particular mad, energy-boosting style. In under five days we achieve an incredible amount of work, making the ship considerably stronger for the Pacific crossing ahead.

The whole steering system comes apart, gets cleaned, inspected, de-rusted, painted, greased, put back together. The shaft's machined straight, the prop cleaned and shining, the rudder polished, painted, fitted with new zincs. Meanwhile the railing gets a full inspection, welded safe at every crack. The shrouds get new stainless bolts, a through-hull in the galley replaced, wood ordered in.

We rush to paint part of the hull.

Meanwhile a whole social scene develops. Kate leaves; Mark and Aurelio hang on until the ship's back in the water. Sean and Bryan step aboard.

A kava ceremony and a big feast. A cooking lesson with Agi, and I learn later that the sauce we made traveled, in her memory, all the way up to the highlands, where it got passed along further still — a lemon butter sauce for Mount Wilhelm trout.

Robyn gives us an incredible travel report from her road trip from hell around the island. Eddie's vibing off every scene.

Nearly the whole crew ends up stoned most days, a big scramble to clean the ship up after — two boats carrying guns and drugs get impounded nearby, sitting there as a quiet reminder. A tree covered in fruit bats, thousands of them taking off mad before sunset. Three hawks dance around the ship, picking off a few fish.

Evenings at the house, beer after a long day at the dry dock. Once, at the fuel dock, a scene straight out of a movie — a bank robbery chase, gunshots, racing through the harbor. Two men caught, two escape. The whole town's talking about it, and everywhere we go we hear a little more of the story.

We leave for anchorage at Kaniet Island.

The dive of a lifetime, in Magic Passage — a cut through the reef, drawing in huge amounts of fish. Visibility's poor, an outgoing current, but the fish are everywhere regardless — schools of barracuda, trevally of every size, sharks, sweetlips, huge fat batfish, black snappers.

We dive Barracuda Point too, incredible visibility, deep, deep blue of the Bismarck Sea. Going down, trevally, fusiliers, rainbow runners come to check us out, but the real jackpot is a three-quarter-meter silvertip rising from the depths. We keep a good lookout for hammerheads without luck, though a hundred fifty feet down, sharks are simply everywhere. A giant mobula ray cruises past. Mackerel, dogtooth tuna, huge jacks, a turtle — everything's here.

On the reef top, schools of tuna race up and down at phenomenal speed, nearly a blur. Barracuda set in formation, four peeling off to get cleaned by cleaner wrasse, then four more taking their place, the others cycling back to the end of the school.

The reef's healthy, though our attention stays locked entirely on the fish life.

August 2, 2002

Departure time. Reading up on the Trobriands, we decide to stop at Egum Atoll.

The voyage turns eventful again — no rest for sailors, it seems. We enter the Vitiaz Strait, and find ourselves going backward. A two-degree course difference is enough to throw everything out of whack. We crank the RPMs — 1300, nothing. 1400, standing still. At 1500 we finally manage half a knot, more or less in the right direction. Almost impossible to hold any course at all. We consider turning back, having to make for Rabaul.

I jump on the helm and for three hours battle every inch of progress possible. We can't anchor, nothing around to hold us. We decide to hug as close to land as we safely can, hoping to find the least resistance from a current running against us at well over four knots.

The strategy pays off, and we manage a knot in the right direction — not holding a course exactly, more a creative, swinging kind of helming, letting momentum carry us where we need to go.

By morning, the worst is over, and we're given the gift of a magnificent landscape, terraced hills stepping down into the blue.

We're burning fuel, and will need to find more at Kiriwina, if any's available at all. Meanwhile the exhaust's sprung a leak that keeps growing; someone's bailing constantly now. We can't stop, not without losing hard-won ground. Ferdi and Carol fix it right before dinner.

Claudia, lovesick, sits silent through every meal now, cursing the world quietly. The engine runs constantly;

there's no rest for the ears. But we're heading the right way, at least enough to reach the next island.

The wind's against us, and it feels almost ironic that the moment engine and steering are finally fixed, they're exactly what we have to rely on most. The sails stay down, waves banging them against the shrouds — we already know what happens next if we don't.

We're out here now, energy running a little low, plenty of gauges aboard showing the signs. A good acting class is genuinely needed.

August 7, 2002

Engine on twenty-four hours a day now, battling wind and wave. The wind's dead against us; the ship's motion turns uncomfortable, wearing the whole ensemble down. I try giving a talk over dinner, without much success.

I propose cutting the engine for ten minutes today, just to give our ears a rest. But we can't afford much more than that — the current would push us straight back, and it's already hard enough making way.

When everyone disappears into their bunks at once, you know something's up. Claudia won't join the group activities, refuses to give anything at all. Lovesick, she won't push for the form. Carol pulls her own move on Ferdi, shifting her bunk in Paradise directly across from his — another unhealthy sign. Small details, but they matter.

August 10, 2002

We enter the channel at Kiriwina at daybreak. The wind's dropped, and we're welcomed by a huge school of spinner dolphins, leading us nearly all the way to our

anchorage. They play, leap, circle the ship, fins slicing the water off stern, bow, port side, starboard side.

I go in, though it's too rough for more than a quick hello. Still, over an hour of magic show. A rainbow leads us the rest of the way in.

Anchored off Boli Point.

Ferdi, Eddie, and I head to Losuia, the main town in the area. The streets are deserted — Sunday, the missionaries clearly did their work well here. The wharf's empty; we learn there's no diesel anywhere on the island. Both main businesses here have their bosses off in Alotau trying to secure fuel. Everyone's asking after kerosene, dzum, petrol.

We get soaked heading back, huge waves breaking over the radial bow.

August 11, 2002

A sailing canoe rigged with a blue sail races toward us, headed for Losuia. I jump aboard for the ride.

The steering's similar to the canoes back in Pere, on Manus — raising or lowering the steering paddle. I take up the bailing station; the canoe isn't rigged for high seas, and water keeps crashing in. The owner stands by the mast, acting as ballast when needed. A three-man crew, the last one on the sheets, bailing too before I arrived. They've come from an island fifteen miles off. The ride's smooth. Their small cargo's a few coconuts, and like everyone else, they're hunting for kerosene. In town, people from the bush have gathered to sell firewood. The nights are darker now, and as one woman put it: it's like going back in time.

Lighter wind than last week let islanders make the trip to Losuia. Sails dot the horizon, motorboats paddled out

to the reef flat to fish. Every canoe we've seen, and likely will see, carries carved, curving bows.

We land on the Losuia dock, lowering sail a few meters off the pier — the pier itself just a mound of coral capped with a slab of cement.

Unlike Sunday, the wharf feels genuinely alive today. Two ships docked, unloading rice, sugar, beer. But no fuel, no kerosene, no diesel. The strange feeling starts to settle in that we might be here a while.

For over two months now, no kerosene, petrol, or diesel has reached the island. The two main stores, both owned by white men, guard their meager supply carefully to keep their own operations running. The two stores sit directly opposite each other — a strange arrangement.

We learn there's no phone or fax available at all; everything runs through SSB radio. To make matters worse, the whole area's split into scheduling zones — two hours a day to actually get through, and even then, the trick is knowing who exactly to reach. The only working radio's at the hospital.

Now it's a juggle of radio waves, local knowledge, and one very helpful man who might just make it pay off. Messages get relayed through two different parties, hopefully reaching Denis, the businessman who flew to Alotau to secure fuel. Will he get the message? Will he help? And the price, when it comes, is mad — over double what we paid in Madang, 2.70 a liter against 1.15.

While waiting for our radio window, I scribble out route, mileage, wind direction, potential sailing distance, generator hours, wind roses and graphs, weighing different courses against each other. We've got twelve hundred liters of diesel in the tanks; we'll need another thousand to stay safe, with nothing extra to spare. The

weather will be everything, and our decisions here carry real weight.

Sheltering, if the wind turns mad.

Conversation flows meanwhile, over the yam harvest, the modernization creeping into kula practice, where partners now exchange more discreetly, outboard motors slowly killing off the tradition of the great sailing parties. But the kula itself persists, moving and evolving with its own time.

Our first impression of "the people" is of a proud people, thoroughly certain of who they are. Most young women wear beautiful shell necklaces, often three cowries strung with beads. Ears pierced, lobes stretched with an impressive weight of rings. Happy faces, soft, no mark of aggression on them anywhere. Men wear cockatoo feathers in their hair, girls a single flower.

On the wharf I meet Ernie. Immediate connection. I ask about fuel; he can't help, his own boat already chartered to two American geologists studying tectonic plate movement — the area's rising 3.5 millimeters a year, one of the fastest rates anywhere on earth. The birth of a mountain, in real time. The region's genuinely complex, a mix of low-lying coral atolls and some of the steepest islands in the world — Goodenough Island, visible from our anchorage on a clear day, eighty miles off.

One of the geologists is also collecting old coral samples, hoping to add pieces to the puzzle of the earth's climate, reaching back as far as they can manage. Climate might be the single most important factor for humanity's survival going forward — El Niño's become mainstream now, a term you hear even on the remotest islands, Hermit Island in the Bismarck Sea, for instance.

Talk of geology turns naturally to gold mining and its byproducts — heavy metals, cyanide chiefly, the real killer chemical. We touch on Lihir, tying it back to our

own time in New Ireland — Lihir dumps its byproduct through a pipeline into the sea, supposedly deep enough to dilute in the deep current, though more study's clearly needed; water movement around these islands isn't predictable without real local observation. Tabar's apparently planning to open a mine of its own too.

Culturally, that could prove disastrous, for a culture already fading. Once revolutionaries of art, a major influence on the Surrealist movement in Europe, and eventually a whole new way of seeing, at least for the Western world. Malinowski, famous, glorified across anthropological circles, pioneered field research here, spending two years in the Trobriands collecting material and building his theories. *The Kula Ring* still inspires — us included, as it happens. But Malinowski, according to Ernie, was also a chronic opium user, the drying up of his supply supposedly the real reason behind his departure, leaving real gaps in his research. Opiates, though, seem to have triggered plenty of minds at the turn of the century. The cultural gaps were closing, or at least being bridged, one way or another.

Sitting on the stern of the *Arona*, scenes unfold around us. The island's best carver working on a huge eagle carving, a white-headed snake in its beak — maybe, in my own mind at least, the snake stands for a white man. Women busy preparing lunch, grinding betel nut for the older men. The lime corrodes their teeth over time; the only real way to "chew" is to pre-chew in beautifully carved wooden vessels. Most men here carry a lime stick, usually bone, heavily decorated with beads, shell money, cowries.

The captain of another boat drops by — sharp-eyed, an islander from the Rossel Island group, a reputed seaman. He and Ernie have known each other since childhood; Ernie was born on Samarai, back when Samarai was still a booming stopover through China Strait. During the Second World War, Samarai was

deliberately destroyed rather than let it fall to the Japanese. After the war, another boom, collapsing again as Alotau rose to become the region's main gateway.

The two of them, nostalgia in their eyes, trade stories of their youth — fearless, diving after a huge mackerel lost on a lure, chasing and catching turtles, one time leaping off the bow to ride a dolphin, ending up scratched across the chest for the trouble. Talk of girls too. Meanwhile people drift by to show their carvings, the smell of frying sweetlip making me genuinely hungry. We eat in silence, enjoying taro chips.

Ernie married on Kitava; his son now runs the *Arona*, a good navigator himself. Though the GPS gets used by locals too, these days. Once, on an island near Woodlark, a giant sea canoe with high bows landed, having come from over two hundred miles off. Intrigued, Ernie asked how they'd ever found such a tiny speck of an island through these treacherous, unpredictable currents. They simply pulled out a GPS.

We meet up again with the canoe we'd arrived on. Francis, the only woman elected in the recent elections, got stranded in Losuia without a ride home — women here are petrified of sailing canoes, it's a man's world, so she rides with us instead, on our black radial. Robyn rides with the canoe.

We end up breaking down along the way, photographing fishing canoes returning to their villages as we drift. The canoe reaches port well before we do — they can hit over eight knots, maybe more.

August 12, 2002

Ernie's *Arona*, stern deck, becomes the scene in town today — everyone drops by, carvers, old friends. A lot of canoes pull in this morning.

The real cash crop here is betel nut, a kina for three. Everyone's after them. One boat comes in with kerosene, a single container, sold by the small beer-bottle full. A crowd gathers around it; I push my way forward and realize just how low the island really is running.

The real spectacle, though, is a small canoe pulling up on the beach with a huge hammerhead shark. Cut right there on the sand, sold for two kina a chunk, liver included. Meanwhile brightly painted canoes sell fish and betel nut alongside.

Everyone assumed the *Arona* would bring petrol and kerosene. Her cargo turned out to be food, and the two geologists, arguing, while I try to convince them, and Ernie, to come aboard for Tuesday night.

Ernie tells tales from thirty years back, explaining the old Trobriand version of tug-of-war — men and women on either end of a vine, the vine gets cut, and everyone falls, the men then having sex with the women right there. Bryan's here, not quite believing his ears.

Time to kill between radio calls to Alotau. By now we know Denis has the message sitting on his desk.

Aboard, meanwhile, the mizzen gets stitched back together, a genuine sailor's scene, the job done beautifully. Claudia builds a lovely new block for the foresail lazyjacks, which broke apart mid-voyage. I keep the radio on now, tuned to the right frequency — every ship in the area uses this channel, and I'm learning the ins and outs of the whole province just from listening.

August 13, 2002

Nothing to do about the diesel but wait. I lead a small expedition to the village of Giva, three miles off.

A mad landing, reefy water made worse by southerly swells crashing on shore. As we approach, kids start

appearing from everywhere. An albino girl greets us, sent to ask what we're here for.

She leads us into the village, where we sit under a thatched-roof platform. We've brought rice, tinned meat, sugar, a small bottle of kerosene. The whole village gathers around. Kids reach to touch your skin, little fingers tickling your feet. Robyn's on my left, Sean at the platform's edge.

I introduce us, point out toward the ship, three miles off. The albino girl speaks English, translating. Women bring yams, carried on their heads, to trade. Realizing it might be wise to divide our goods, I offer the chief first pick — every village here has a chief, who's also, effectively, its owner. I make clear our real reason for coming is simply to meet them.

Once the trades are settled and both sides satisfied, we move to a grass mat. The chief opens coconuts, the customary greeting at every village meeting. Three of his wives sit beside us — a signal, apparently, that it's fine for everyone else to come greet us too. Kids everywhere around us now.

I talk about the ship, our voyage, the Vitiaz Strait. The chief, childless himself, was given children by his brother, to keep the family line unbroken. He takes part in the kula; he sent his own armshells to his partner two weeks ago.

We rise to look at the canoes, every bow carved, though unused this season — out of petrol, unable to reach Losuia. No trips to town lately. The islanders are largely self-sufficient, growing yams in their gardens, taro still the daily staple. The yam house doesn't look especially full; the harvest's been poor this year.

We sit to eat — taro and icama, delicious greens cooked in coconut milk. We learn a village higher up the island will bring their own yams down to fill the house here.

The chief's daughter tells us about her sick sister, who looks like the life's been drained clean out of her, and we promise to come back Friday with meat for her, trading for papaya and greens in return.

So we start a relationship.

August 15, 2002

A ride into Losuia. The *Arona*'s called in — the *Hasala*, the cargo boat running from Alotau, is loading diesel, and Denis is back in town.

I walk to Kiriwina Lodge, forty-five minutes off, through gardens and coconut groves. The men are busy in their gardens, planting season underway. No one walks empty-handed here, hands always full. No cars running; we take the walking trail instead — logs laid across the road make it unusable for the few vehicles left anyway.

We pass through a few villages, kids always asking my name — "Dimdim, what's your name?" — then dissolving into laughter and giggles, like they've won some prize, arguing over it, repeating it back in different ways. A real glimpse into language itself, and one of the main reasons behind Papua New Guinea's extraordinary cultural diversity. A few French words have found their way in — *couteau*, knife, or the greeting *buena, buenalalai*, good afternoon. Maybe the knife arrived with the first French explorers; plenty of islands here carry French names, the Trobriands themselves, d'Entrecasteaux, a French explorer who sailed through in 1793.

Denis, an Englishman, got the message but only loaded two drums — not nearly enough for our trip, the island so dry on fuel that the boat's arrival alone might draw a crowd.

Chewing betel nut, lunching on a coconut under a coconut palm — no one sits beneath a tree bearing ripe

fruit here, apparently — I run through every strategy in my head, sketching a rough map in the grass with betel nut husks, weighing distances, timing. Best, I decide, to head to Egum, then down to Alotau, fuel up fully, and continue on to the Solomons from there.

August 16, 2002

We drop by the village again, the usual warm welcome from the kids. The chief can't join us for the trip to the northern village today — a child died yesterday, and an exchange ceremony's underway.

A quick decision's needed. We'd planned to visit the northern village for the filling of the yam house; we learn it's a two-hour walk each way. I decide to press on anyway — another death ceremony wouldn't have been the right energy for us right now.

We walk through gardens on a well-worn path, plenty of traffic coming the other way, women especially, carrying banana-leaf grass skirts on their heads — women's money, women's wealth, headed for distribution. We reach Koma, the only inland village, greeted with coconuts. Women still go topless here; the village, with its empty yam houses, feels almost deserted, apart from a few men carving a machete handle and older women cooking taro.

On the way back we pass an artistically decorated armband for the kula, hung on a house's front door like a prized possession, and the whole meaning of the kula suddenly clicks into place somehow, felt deeply, though never quite formed into words.

Our arrival gathers a crowd regardless.

August 23, 2002

A dive at Egum Rock.

August 24, 2002

Claudia announces she's leaving the ship.

August 25, 2002

Anchored in Alotau.

Chapter Four

The Solomon Islands, Again

Simbo Island, Solomon Islands

Second Trip, October 2002

The green lake of Ove, sulfur fumes rising off it, megapode eggs and coconut crabs boiled in a volcanic vent. Eomba, aomba — the dance performed, we're told, for the last time. Mason, Keana, Eddie, John Tiony's son, and Somo.

A music studio comes together aboard for a full jam-session extravaganza. Eddie heads to Ranonga to bring his cousin back, loaded down with huge speakers, bass guitar, electric guitar, keyboard — the ship turns into a stage overnight, lights on, microphone plugged in. Ovaline stays aboard a few days.

Church day, divine singing. Stories of the Pratt family, French traders from the 1800s. A dive in the caves. Basket weaving with granny. A climb to the top of the hill for more custom sites. A meeting with the reef. Kiana comes bearing another mbakia. A last meal, all together.

Mbabanga Island, 2002

Ambros transfers his power to me, along with special spells for healing boils, eye sickness, bleeding. A half-hour prayer. A performance of dances — cancan, Cambodian, square dance, eomba, ballet, disco rock, Russian. The warden and the video, a meeting to follow later in Honiara.

Noro

A wedding. Dugongs, sharks, ghost pipefish. The Second World War left divers plenty of wrecks here, long since turned into natural sea sculptures, overgrown now with soft coral, mussels, shells, sponges, tube worms. We dive a sunken barge at night — porcelain crabs, shrimp of every kind out and about, usually hidden by day. The real jackpot: two ghost pipefish, entirely unafraid, posing almost graciously for the camera. A mad night of docking, fueling up to the top.

Russell Island, November 2002

Dive, dive, dive. The current runs mad; the body stays relaxed, less friction than tension would give. A wild parade begins. Grey reef sharks, almost too curious, come in close — close enough that I feel a flicker of real discomfort. A white tip cruises past; a fat black tip patrols his own stretch of territory. The floating market.

Honiara, November 2002

A city with a bad reputation, under the press's constant spotlight, the gossip line stretching clear across the Solomons. Nobody has a kind word for Honiara. The last of the rebels are still holed up, hunted by the current government, though the government itself is broke, unable even to fuel the navy boats. One boat's been repurposed just to carry corpses — two men died being brought back to Honiara while we tried to anchor near the yacht club. Three patrol boats, a gift from the Australian government, arrived during a fishing dispute — the Solomons kept issuing licenses to Japanese and Korean boats, and Australia, deciding this was wrong, handed over patrol boats to police their own waters. But no follow-up funding ever came, no maintenance money, no fuel. Fishing seems to breed dispute wherever it goes, and for good reason — it's a big box, a very big box.

A pilot boat circles. We re-anchor.

The yacht club scene — Point Cruz, a legacy of the British Empire, remains the hot spot for expats and local politicians alike, everyone gathering there in their own particular feeling of exclusivity. We're told, quite plainly, that we're tolerated there, but Eddie and Rumblass, Mason's son, are not. A strange feeling, given we're guests in their own country.

Plenty of politicians are out of work since the crisis two years back, when the Malaita Eagle Force took over the government in a coup the country's never truly recovered from. Most Australian aid has dried up. But the custom of telling stories is alive and well here regardless.

Dolphin Teeth

It's dolphin season now, and not a good one to be a dolphin. The Malaitans hunt them for their teeth. I'd assumed, at first, that only a handful were taken each day — that illusion got shattered today. The dolphins are slaughtered for around twenty US dollars each, the whole business rooted in money from the start. Dolphin teeth serve as traditional currency here, worn as necklaces, armbands, headbands — not one tooth at a time, but hundreds strung together into something like a thorny band. I've seen it everywhere in town, around people's necks.

The dolphins are driven toward shore by dozens of canoes banging rocks against the water's surface, a high priest leading the whole affair. Once they're in the bay, the bay gets sealed off, and the slaughter begins. Hundreds of dolphins die in a single drive.

The man telling me all this is a former government official, currently waiting for something, anything, to happen.

Dolphins are sometimes taken by the thousand, entirely legal under the umbrella of kastom, tradition. A tooth can't officially be sold, though I've seen them plainly in the market, strung alongside other shell money — one or two Solomon dollars a piece, and I can only wonder how many dolphins that actually represents.

Visions of red-stained beaches, carcasses, fill my head. I saw this scene, vividly, in a dream years ago, and at the time couldn't make sense of the camera in it, the crowd of photographers, myself among them, frozen. It all makes a terrible kind of sense now. Documentary crews have come through since, and if anything, their attention seems only to have revived the kastom further.

A man is apparently setting up a "dolphin project," though a little digging reveals he's actually a dolphin smuggler. Aquariums in the West are struggling to keep their supply up — dolphins taken off the coasts of Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean carry too much toxicity now, polluting the breeding stock, so the hunt's turned toward cleaner specimens, and the Solomons, with relatively little toxic waste of their own so far, look like a good source. Unless, of course, some company's already quietly arranged to start dumping here too.

This man captures the dolphins, trains them, ships them off to aquariums. He talks about a research station, a resort, but the moment I actually see his face, I know exactly what he's here for. I spot him in the yacht club crowd before I even know who he is — a chill runs down my spine. Dirty eyes.

I stay calm on the surface.

The kastom will die out eventually, since only a handful of high priests still know how to gather the dolphins this way. It doesn't work with an outboard motor — the dolphins simply dive and escape. For reasons no one can quite explain, the rhythmic clashing of stones together is what keeps them from diving.

A man has to be pure of thought to succeed at it, I'm told.

The teeth are required as bride price now, the price only climbing — more dolphins needed, more population, more dolphins needed again. So the more this culture thrives, the more dolphins die. There are already complaints that dolphins aren't as numerous as they once were. Unsustainability's already been reached. It's the only place in the Solomons where this particular custom exists, though it's traveled along with Malaitans settling on other islands. The government doesn't, and largely can't, do much about it, since a good many government officials are Malaitan themselves.

The Malaitans moved en masse to Guadalcanal after the Second World War, rebuilding Honiara into what became the new capital. They settled around the city, buying land — and eventually land disputes arose, which is where most of the ethnic tension here actually traces back to. It's happening across the Solomons, but took on its largest proportions here on Guadalcanal, the fierce fighting eventually spilling into the civil war of 2000.

One rebel, trained by an international agency, leads the opposition, hiding in the bush, hunted by the army with little success — fast becoming something of a legend, not unlike Osama bin Laden. His name is Harold Keke. He fought in the Bougainville conflict — tall, strong, muscular, fierce-looking, the kind of man who'd have made a great warrior chief in the old days, and, in every practical sense, still is one.

The Big Metropolis

Everything's for sale here — shop after shop, and the bug's caught all of us. Bags keep coming aboard, beer, shoes, shirts, soap, perfume. The first impulse's usually to communicate, calls to friends, family, then some form of intoxication, music, a beer, a kind of social scattering, the city gripping you tight.

It isn't Singapore, but for the first time in months we actually need to watch for cars crossing a street. People walk faster here. No one stops you to talk; your own private space stays genuinely your own. The city puts real distance between people.

The Library

Books and papers on the Solomons and the Pacific. We only get an hour before it closes at four — a mad rush, gorging ourselves on information, hunting for more clues about Simbo.

A Dance from Makira

A German man with a loudspeaker shouts out over the crowd. People from Makira have come to fundraise for a center for people with disabilities. We watch a dance performed by a deaf and mute group, the movement genuinely astonishing — sexual, plenty of pelvis thrust, an organic, wordless voice running through it. Shell necklaces, rattles. They perform the same dance four times a day, in different locations around town.

Youth fair. Politics. The market — tuna and crab. A mad stocking-up on rum. The boom box. Emails, and thoughts drifting back to people far away. Sierra, a real gem. The infection in my foot still refusing to quit, a crazy few days of it.

A sixties night — singing along to *Hair* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Arriving in Honiara, we hit the local video store and pick up everything sixties we can find. *Hair* moves me exactly as much as it did twenty years ago; *Jesus Christ Superstar* brings back flashes of Sinai, though it's aged a little. I can't help drawing the line straight to the Theater of All Possibilities. A whole run of sixties films, setting the tone for the social revolution that followed — race, war, the nuclear family, all of it.

Voyage, December 1, 2002

December 5, 2002

Yellowtail slicing through the water, trade winds out of the south, a soft breeze, current running north. The sails are happy; the helm sits deserted, the ship steering herself in exactly the right direction. Birds keep trying to guess where the next bluefin tuna will surface. The ship's own eyes, watching.

Splashes, blows, splashes, blows, waves crashing on the bow, bioluminescent trails — the dolphins are hunting, using the ship itself to corner their prey, it seems. They keep coming from the port side, half playing, half hunting, or maybe both at once. I can smell their breath on the blow. An hour passes, the game still going — riding the waves, silhouettes of fins, the sound of echolocation, singing, voices, the rigging joining in, the waves keeping their own uneven beat, our bow slicing through, sail steady in the wind. My mind talking to the dolphins, right here, right now — illusion? Maybe. But reality is whatever you can make it. The voice keeps singing its own signature: this is me, right now, can you hear me? The stars are bright, telling their own stories, no cloud in the sky, every shooting star fully exposed.

Drifting in the right direction, the wind two points before the beam, the current holding us in position, sailing and drifting both at around three knots whenever the wind blows. I asked the dolphins one night about the weather. They kept coming, and coming. I took it as a message, just couldn't decipher it. We were close to Russell Island, a spot known for the occasional cyclone, usually in December — and it was December, the wind building. I asked the dolphins to leave, if that was meant as a warning. They stayed. A real weight off my mind — no rational thought behind it, just instinct. I learned later that Eddie had taken their presence as an omen too,

dolphins at night carrying a taboo in his own culture. His grandfather was sick, filling with water, dying by then. He'd done the same thing, asked the dolphins to leave if his grandfather had already died. They stayed.

For three straight days, massive bluefin tuna jump all around the ship. We're too slow to troll properly.

Arabian night aboard, Tuesday.

Edges. The antibiotics' side effects — after weeks of an infection that wouldn't quit, barely able to walk, I finally start a week of antibiotics. They put your nerves right on edge, throw off your balance. I move more carefully around the deck now, often lying down, losing my sense of direction for a while.

Theater review: the Mbabanga performance, the eomba dance, acting classes built around voice, scene work, song, movement. Synergia — poetry night, tales from the high seas, weaving culture into form, Mason and Simbo joining us on Sundays and Tuesdays, comments and observations running as always. We've kept our own form intact even with visitors aboard — Mason, Somo, and Kiana all giving Sunday speeches, a genuinely hilarious Halloween party with Mason, Eddie, and Clifford all dressed up. Tuesdays have become real talk-story nights, the art of conversation in full swing. Mason took to lab immediately, open to whatever was happening aboard. Ship work continues alongside it all — painting, a new floor, sails, a running war against rust on the winch, the engine room.

December 9, 2002

Anchored off the Bonvouloir Reefs, at the edge of the Louisiades — a chain of submerged reefs, the occasional island popping up here and there. Stars out, a real break in the voyage toward Alotau. Suddenly the energy shifts,

a tension building around who wants to dive, and I channel it fast into structure, a plan.

Ferdi, Carol, and Sean go down the anchor chain, but within minutes the dive's aborted — Sean's lost his weight belt, Carol's checking her ears, Ferdi surfaces with stories of big sharks. I get excited, gear up, a stick in hand just in case. Carol checks her ears again; I go down to try to recover the weight belt. As I follow the chain, three baby grey reef sharks circle in for an inspection — no aggression, just plain curiosity. I doubt this spot's ever really been dived; the fish simply aren't afraid. At a hundred forty-five feet, a huge grey reef shark comes to visit, turning away only when it gets within two feet of me. Above, three more babies. I stir up a big white tip resting on the bottom; he'll stay with us the rest of the dive. My computer cuts out; I decide to follow the chain back up to check the anchor. The big shark stays below, the babies keep circling. A huge stingray, unbothered, glides gracefully away after I stroke her side. A baby turtle looks me over while a huge Napoleon wrasse cruises past with a jack at its flank. Carol's already gone up, uneasy with the sharks around. I rise slowly, stopping for an emergency safety stop — with the computer dead, I honestly don't know if I need it or not.

After some trouble with the portable dive compressor, we go for a snorkel instead. Eddie and I had already scouted the anchorage earlier. The place is wild — not packed with fish exactly, but wild, untamed, pristine. Good coral, a strong current. The sea's picked up by now, changing the light on the bottom. I find the spot where everything gathers — a huge school of black snapper mixed with trevally, a few jacks trailing me, a dozen enormous bumphead parrotfish crunching loudly on coral. Sweetlips everywhere; the school parts for a passing grey reef shark.

I keep diving down — Napoleon wrasse, butterflyfish, angelfish, the whole cast of the reef present and accounted for. The area's simply too remote to have ever been fished. We're eighty miles from Alotau, with no real shelter from the elements, the ship sitting bow-out from the reef, current and wind pushing us steadily away.

I turn my mind to music, listening, recording for our New Year's party. A jam session, Stinj coming up with a blues riff, Orla and I building the refrain around it —

*The sun is new every day,
To the black ship that got away,
Freedom of sea people,
Turning dreams into reality.*

A strong acting class follows.

Acting Class, December 7, 2002

Intent: everyone lies on the floor, silent. The gong rings; bodies wake, stretch, come alive without standing. A visualization of rough seas, rolling, music in flute tones, a steady beat.

No words at first — sounds, experimenting, reaching for unfamiliar noises, birds, whistles, crashing, hissing, a natural voice opening the chest. Keep stretching, but rise now.

An explosion of laughter. Dance to the beat, careful not to fall into any known, walked pattern. Exploration through the hands, touch, feeling. Work on a conscious lack of coordination, different parts of the body pulling in different directions. Bring in sound, no melody. A cocoon, ready to be broken.

We play a game with a towel, using only our feet, and I catch a real insight into how games are actually born. It started with no rules at all, but the game kept jamming, so a few rules crept in. Everyone forgot they had hands;

the feet came alive instead. Competition helped. We'd already explored the hands, new sensations, changing texture with the gong's rhythm; as the beat quickened, energy rose, hands moving everywhere. Then the feet took over, free to do as they liked.

We close the session with a jam, everyone taking a turn as bandleader.

We'd opened the class lying on the floor, five minutes of silence, letting the day's clutter fall away, letting everyone actually arrive. Then we woke in stretches, trying to explore without consciously naming it as movement. The action has to stay conscious. I called a visualization of rough seas, bodies moving freely against each other, rising without the help of hands, only the pressure of another body. Once everyone stood, we explored rotation, rolling off each other, losing our sense of direction until a few of us collapsed to the floor. Then the hands took over. Up again, voice work, before sliding into the jam.

December 10, 2002

Dive, dive, dive — a magic spot, the reef pristine. Stinj and I drop to twenty feet, checking his breathing, moving toward the deeper reef. Big rainbow runners come close, circling to a ridiculous distance, no fear at all. A school of barracuda passes. Baby grey reef sharks keep appearing overhead. We spot a big one, shy, though he draws closer the deeper we go — they always seem bolder down there. Sweetlips, a school of black snapper, shoals of surgeonfish of every kind hang at the edge of the drop. Fusiliers and caesio rain down. More rainbow runners, big mackerel cruising by.

Stinj's comfortable, so we run a few exercises through the parade of fish — mask clearing, buddy breathing among rainbow runners and baby grey reefs, weight-belt removal. We swim toward the deep, through clouds of

anthias, more sharks, a ray hiding under a ledge, unicornfish, bumphead parrots, Napoleon wrasse, groupers, snappers. Everything's here. The coral's remarkably diverse, in perfect condition. The place feels wild, and at the same time carries an undefinable serenity. The reef feels peaceful — no fish panics, though predators patrol constantly. A few jacks pass by too. It feels almost like a sacred place, a kind of reef mecca, untouched by man. I know that's partly illusion — man has fished here — but so rarely that the fish still keep their natural behavior, seeing divers, it seems, for the first time. Curious, they come to investigate.

The feeling of witnessing something genuinely privileged. Coming up, we all wear the same ecstatic smile, reborn, at least for a few hours, into someone new. The blocks, temporarily, removed.

Eddie, seeing all that fish, gets his hunting spirit back. "We go fishing tonight, with the moonlight — heha, fishing tonight."

As our good friend Heraclitus would have said, you never step on the same reef twice. The reef is new every day. How true that turns out to be.

I never once question my being on the reef, the way I sometimes do out on the open sea. There's a sense of belonging here, and somehow, organically, you can feel that this is where we actually come from.

We dive the outer, northern part of the reef next — just as action-packed, surgeonfish and unicornfish in massive schools, a few hundred spadefish, rainbow runners. A few sharks on patrol, huge mackerel. The real jackpot: about thirty monster bumphead parrotfish, crunching coral, leaving trails of sand behind them. Most of the coral here carries huge bite marks, the bumpheads' particular signature.

Tonight we go fishing — Eddie, Stinj, and I drive out into the dark toward the reef's edge. The moment the bait hits the water, my line pulls hard; hauling it up, a grey reef shark hangs on the end. We carefully unhook him, watching him thrash back into the water — a baby, this one.

Eddie lands a red emperor. It's a good spot; we haul in a few more emperor. My line goes tight — a huge mackerel shoots for the boat and snaps the line clean, burning my fingers on the way through. We keep losing hooks, bitten clean off. Four shark bites in total, though the last one we don't even let get near the boat — as I pull the line, I know something big's on it. Kekeleke — surprise, a meter and a half of shark. I let the line run, then cut it straight away.

The pull on the line stays strong throughout, and you genuinely never know what's actually taken the hook. Stinj lands only one fish, but the biggest of the night. I get the biggest thrill from the shark; Eddie takes the count for most fish caught. We keep at it until every hook's bitten clean off. Eddie tries one last time — another shark. In under two hours we bring in about thirty kilos of first-grade fish, though there are simply too many sharks around by the end. We picture one of the big ones taking a liking to the rubber boat, enough to make us call it. Boat loaded with fish, middle of the night — I wouldn't much fancy a swim right now.

We clean the catch, fill the freezer, happy with what we caught ourselves, plenty of excitement for one night.

Another magic dive — unicorns parading close, so close, twirling around you, unafraid, curious. Two white tips hide in a crevasse, spooked by the camera flash, though trevally and jacks whirl past in a full three-hundred-sixty-degree panorama. Huge mackerel cruise by.

Tuna jumping off the stern. Our fishing energy's renewed — Eddie and I go out to troll, though the tuna

won't bite. We try along the reef edge instead, a strike, then a lost fish, though we know now they're biting. Eddie lands a dogtooth tuna, destined to become sashimi. I land a mackerel after a few tries. We're heading in when we abort, wanting to keep going instead.

The dogtooth's flesh, white and sweet, ranks among the best raw fish textures I know, and we gorge on it after dinner.

The anchor comes up, and a huge sailfish jumps off the stern — a magnificent sight, a fitting goodbye to a genuinely special place, at a genuinely special time.

December 11, 2002

Dolphins ride the bow — a hundred feet of visibility, and I feel the invitation plainly. Hanging from the bobstay chain, the show begins. Two groups, four bottlenose and thirty or forty spinners. The bottlenose seem to sound out my entire body, turning their heads toward me. After a first inspection pass, they come in close, making runs a meter away. Groups of spinners shoot up from below, taking a sharp turn at the top. The bottlenose stare back, wise-eyed. Surrounded on every side, the ride turns genuinely magical. They stay half an hour; the bottlenose leave first, though a handful of spinners keep riding alongside, perfect formation, eyes watching from below. For a while a group swims upside down, drawing closer and closer.

In the middle of the night, the bottlenose return. The moon's out; I lower myself into the water. Trails of bioluminescence shoot off their tails like comets. My eyes can just make them out; my body reads them even better, constant echolocation running through me. They leave a while to fish, then keep coming back to the bow.

Early morning, the bottlenose are back again, and for the third time I go in. By now they're thoroughly playful, swimming alongside more than riding the bow wave — a real treat. A jellyfish whips me across the arm; I barely notice. By now it genuinely feels like something's been established — friends, made in the sea.

December 12, 2002

We arrive in Alotau. Easy customs, straight into town.

"The compressor part's still somewhere out there. Neither Gaie nor Xtine ever received the message we sent from Honiara."

December 13, 2002

Eibes arrives, an adventure's worth of travel report delivered that night — tired, but in great spirits, his energy spinning around the ship at full speed.

The lodge, out of town, past a river — built entirely from bush materials, genuinely gorgeous, art from all over. We're greeted by a bigger-than-life character, Greta, Polish by descent, eighteen years in New Guinea by now, full of stories about stolen helicopters and a fierce sense of belonging here, her eyes not lying about any of it.

December 21, 2002

A dive at Sullivan Patch. The reef extends underwater through a sixty-foot passage where schools of Spanish mackerel cruise. Big barracuda trail behind while clouds of anthias feed on plankton carried in by the constant current sweeping the reef. Unicorn and surgeonfish rest near a sandy patch, maybe mating, maybe guarding eggs — we usually find them twenty or thirty meters off the reef edge instead. Big schools of fusiliers and caesio nearly blot out the surface. Groupers and sweetlips

gather in the incoming current. Visibility's excellent, though a cold upwelling draws in extra nutrients, and big-eye trevally congregate around it.

The reef top's remarkably healthy, huge branching acropora, table corals — twenty years ago this reef was completely devastated by a plague of crown-of-thorns starfish, so thoroughly decimated that the crown-of-thorns themselves eventually starved for lack of anything left to eat. The reef's clearly recovered since, growing back fast.

Daily Life

What actually is our daily life? We have daily lives, weekly lives, yearly lives — a whole exploration of time, from the instant to the infinite, and every combination in between. We play with timelines, intersecting, sometimes conflicting. A play of attention, always evolving.

We work, and play, with form. A daily schedule, the "official" time frame — always, in the end, expeditions inner and outer.

A gong, made in Bali by a gamelan master, rings to wake us. Its resonance always lands a little differently, depending on mood, on the person striking it. In a village, a rooster keeps the tempo; here, we have a gong, worked by whoever's cooking that day. The cook's already up, preparing breakfast, fresh bread baking in the oven, lunch to follow later.

The second ring, half an hour on, carries its own message — breakfast is ready. The crew starts to appear, some just waking, others already nursing a mug of fresh coffee, a cigarette already lit for a few.

Fifteen minutes later, our morning meeting — the day's plan, technical updates passed around. "The saltwater pump in the men's head isn't working."

The moment the meeting ends, bodies scatter in every direction, off to their tasks.

The gong rings again — lunch. Today, fresh fish, caught trolling the reef's edge, a dogtooth tuna, firm white flesh, rice, greens, fresh pineapple filling the plates. Everyone finds shade, away from the fierce sun. Plenty of us nap. We rarely talk much over lunch, keeping the ship peaceful, letting the sea sing its own duet with a cloudless sky.

The gong again — lunch break's over, the sound keeping time, punctuating the whole day. Another meeting, the daily ship cleanup. "I'll take command room." "I'll do Nemo's." That closes out the "official" day. Two people cook dinner.

Monday, December 16, 2002

Food bill paid, stock brought aboard. TNT office, chasing the compressor part. Messages to Gaie and Lazer. A message to Michelle. Preparing a Christmas message. Gathering a contact list. Visiting dive boats. The provincial government, for our diving permits.

Tuesday, December 17, 2002

Kira's introduced to the ship. Off with Orla.

Wednesday, December 18, 2002

A dive with Stinje — open-water skills, emergency ascent, diver tow, free-flow breathing. A dive with Linda and Sean, an advanced wreck dive. Underwater equipment review with Eibes.

Thursday, December 19, 2002

Getting the camera gear properly shipshape.

SEA PEOPLE, STILL

Friday, December 20, 2002

Picking up Gaie and Laser. Ship shape, all around.

A Note on Return

The log ends here, in Alotau, in December 2002 — not because the year did, but because this is where the record of it stops. The ship's own Christmas and New Year were still ahead of her, and the Pacific crossing documented in *Crossing the North Pacific* was still five months off.

This was, in its own way, the hardest year to write about — no single dramatic loss like a foremast coming down, no rendezvous at sea with a stranger's fuel. Just the accumulated weight of a year spent almost entirely in transit: dry docks that dragged on, currents that ran the wrong way, a crew that changed shape more than once, and, running underneath all of it, reefs blown apart by dynamite and dolphins killed for their teeth — hard things, witnessed plainly, without much editorializing at the time.

Reading it back now, this feels like the year the expedition leader in me had to do the most actual leading — not the dramatic kind, but the daily, unglamorous kind: holding a crew together through a leadership change, keeping morale up through weeks of dry dock, deciding, again and again, what to say and what to simply let pass. Most of what happens aboard a ship like this never gets written down at all. This is simply the part that did.

Glossary

Bio

A working and living space aboard the Heraclitus.

Comments and observations

A recurring evening ritual in which crew members shared honest reflections on the day, the voyage, or each other.

Duk duk

A masked dance and men's secret society of New Ireland, Papua New Guinea.

Kastom

Melanesian Pidgin for custom or tradition; used across Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands for traditional practice and law.

Kula

A ceremonial exchange system of shell valuables practiced across the Trobriand Islands and neighboring archipelagos.

Nemo's

The ship's library and quiet common room.

PCRF

The Planetary Coral Reef Foundation, founded in 1991, the organization behind the Heraclitus's broader reef research mission.

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.

SEA PEOPLE, STILL

SEA PEOPLE, STILL