

THE CONTACT IS MADE

*French Polynesia to Samoa and Tuvalu,
July 2004 – March 2005*

Michel Lippitsch

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

First edition.

A Note on the Text

This book draws on thirteen pieces from Michel's archive. Most were written during a voyage aboard the Heraclitus from French Polynesia toward Samoa between July and October 2004; one shorter, later entry comes from Tuvalu, December 2004 to March 2005. The narrative follows Taha'a's departure through Rarotonga, Aitutaki, the Phoenix Islands, Kanton, and Tokelau, into Apia. No surviving narrative covers the earlier legs of the voyage, from Rangiroa through Huahine, so the book picks up where Michel's prose does, at Taha'a.

Five short poems from the same period — "Raise the Sails," "Reflexion of the Blue Lights of the Lagoon," "False Killer Whale," "Keep the Song of the Lagoon Alive," and "Coral Holocaust" — are set as interludes close to where they fit, the way verse has been used elsewhere in these books.

The "London" chapter is drawn from a longer French-language memoir Michel wrote partway through the voyage, in which memories of an earlier ocean crossing and of an earlier chapter of his life in London surface unbidden. It's translated into English here. The closing lines of the Western Samoa chapter, written in French, are given both in French and in translation.

One passage needed a different kind of care. During the passage from Taha'a to Rarotonga,

Michel records a serious incident between two named crew members — a drunken encounter that leaves one of them injured and refusing to speak to the other, and a real crisis that takes days to work through.

The Tuvalu chapter is shorter than the rest and belongs to a separate, later leg of the voyage. In Michel's own archive it breaks off mid-scene, entering the pass of Nukufetau, and that's where it ends here too.

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31 July 2004

Taha'a to Rarotonga

*Raise the sails, the wind is calling
Raise the dreams, the world is
waiting
We will never be back in the same
places,
All we can do is to hold some
traces,
We feed on beauty and
transcendence,
To run wild for our independence.
Dance, we might be back anew,
For another song of life and ocean
for a few.*

The full moon rises over the peak of Taha'a. We arrived on the last full moon, into the perfect bay, sheltered from the maramu, the wind out of the northeast, and from the trades out of the east-southeast. Three hundred spinner dolphins came to feed in the bay for three days running. Every morning their blows resonated over the water — spins, flips, tail slaps. They came close to the ship, rode our bow wave on the way out to dives.

Today, the thirty-first of July 2004, they're here for our departure too. The sky turns dark gray and the rain starts, thick and heavy, gusting hard. The anchor chain gets stuck, twisted by the tide working in and out of the

bay. We finally clear the channel on an incoming tide, drenched, and the dolphins escort us out to the safety of the open ocean.

Raise the sails! Eddie's voice carries over everything: "Satu, dua, tiga" — three words left over from our Indonesian days. Everyone still upright climbs on deck, and within thirty minutes every sail is up and we're making six knots, wind on the beam. Past the shelter of Raiatea, the sacred island, home to Taputapuatea, the largest marae in Polynesia, the swells rise, and half the crew hang over the rail emptying their stomachs. The transition isn't gentle. We had become land for a while, and now the sea is taking us back.

Our strategy is to sail as far south as we can — going west is never the problem, with the easterlies dominating the southern Pacific. Half the crew have never sailed before; everything is new to them, the helm, reading the wind, the movement of the hull slicing through water. We rig safety lines. Squalls hit with thick rain, and in between them rainbows appear ahead of us. Hina, the moon, keeps hiding behind the clouds.

Bora Bora appears one last time, like a diva taking a final encore. She's earned it — the shark dives that pumped us full of adrenaline, nights danced away, va'a races with six paddlers a boat filling the lagoon, cheers and drums, copra competitions, the poetry of the spoken language, conversations overlapping into their own kind of harmony, sensual

overload, the coral cemetery, the best smile in the universe, the fastest hips, the glorious bodies, the shading blues of the lagoon, roast pig in coconut milk, Hinano beer and the mornings after, the paka paka turning the sky into its own spectacle, parades of officials and every institution and business exposed at once, conversations about nuclear madness and stories from the Second World War, fresh baguette every morning, shark legends, fruit races, and songs that will stay in our bodies forever. Now Bora Bora disappears over the horizon, to become memory.

The wind stays strong, six knots on the beam, and the ocean blurs time until moment and memory feel like the same thing. Falling in love, a chemical high, emotion raising the heat, stupid love songs running through the head, a feast of sensations remembered and recreated. The king of all marlin comes to visit the stern — five meters of grace and power, cruising alongside us for twenty minutes. Then we land our first fish, a fifteen-kilo bonito, then a seven-kilo mahi mahi. The tuna becomes Polynesian raw fish salad, with lemon we were given as a gift in Taha'a; the mahi mahi becomes dinner, fried in butter and capers. Life is good for our stomachs, even for the few of us who still feel the occasional urge to run for the rail.

The night runs long. The wind shifts into a gale, then dies, and the ship rolls in the swell. A parrel on the mainsail snaps, and it turns into a tacking game, working the ship into

whatever position is most bearable. A low-pressure system moving east off the south changes our whole relationship with the wind; by four in the morning it picks back up, calms our sails, and we drift northwest for most of the day. Fixing the parrel takes acrobatics, and gives my body a rush.

Whales, whales! A few meters off, staying close to the surface, two of them circle the ship. My whole body wants to be in the water with them. We rig a line, the ship holding three knots. Ambassador to the mind of the ocean — put your mind and body there and let it be. The two whales call others in. Eight of them end up circling the ship, each in turn coming to present itself. Civilized. For two hours a kind of ballet plays out, a dance between man and whale and ship. I'm in the water to let them see one of us.

More whales, more whales. Majestic, ambassadorial — we meet. Hours where time seems to stop altogether. A mother brings her calf to show us. Four whales, Bryde's, maybe some unrecorded species, hold thirty meters off our bow, then come alongside to look over the strange creature we must seem, the newest evolutionary arrival on the planet. Somehow it feels like they've stopped hunting us, and a few of these humans are showing an interest in making contact. We'll get closer, and closer, see what this one is made of. He seems excited — you can see it in how he holds his echolocation. He wants to see our eyes. Let's go meet him. The contact is made.

He looks harmless. Let's keep them happy, and stay with them a while.

Fish, fish — a big one. I wrap the line around my body; it pulls hard. After fifteen minutes we get him close to the stern. Eddie and Marlow stand ready with the gaff. His yellow flank slices the water; we hook him, haul him up, and he thrashes against it. I go in on him with a knife to the head. Blood is over everything, like a battle. It takes my whole body weight to hold him still. We hang him on the rowbar — the scale reads eighty pounds, our biggest fish in years. It takes an hour to clean and portion him out, enough to last us the week.

Raw yellowfin tuna salad, Polynesian style: cut the tuna into cubes, add salt and lemon juice, pour over fresh coconut milk, eat. Closer to land we add shredded carrot, cabbage, cucumber, tomato. My body wants nothing else. I could eat raw fish forever without ever getting tired of the taste or the texture of it. The old Polynesians never had trouble feeding themselves from the sea, and they navigated it faster and better than any European ship of their time — Cook himself wrote of canoes circling his ships and then outrunning them, already waiting at port by the time he arrived. There's a whole misconception about how long it actually takes to travel by sea. The Polynesians weren't savages; they were a civilization, a civilization of sea people, intimate with the element, the ocean in their blood.

Our fishing pole gets shredded by a giant mahi mahi — he takes the line straight down, faking one way first, then diving hard around the prop and the hull as the gaff reaches for him, taking the top of the pole and the line with him. A solitary minke whale brushes against the ship, almost affectionate, her blow reaching all the way up to the deck. We're within sight of land now — Rarotonga.

A voyage of a thousand faces. Landfall brings its own drama. We put on a party, dancing, feasting, and the mood turns. Eddie, drunk, loses his hold on himself, and in trying to get close to Nicole he hurts her badly enough to draw blood; she's shaken, and refuses to speak to him afterward. He gets loud, a mind crowded with everything unsaid finally spilling out, and won't take no for an answer. I put myself bodily between them — our roughest encounter yet — since I'm the only one he'll listen to. He tries to get to her all night; I keep stopping him. Long faces everywhere. Then it all comes up at once: Nicole wants to leave the ship, and has decided this is the reckoning.

A huge strategy meeting where everything threatens to fall apart. It takes everything I have and more to hold it together, redirect the meeting, and save us all at the same time. Emotion takes over every face in the room, everyone crying except Nicole, who at first refuses to forgive him, wanting him gone from the ship. Eddie, a broken man, can't make sense of what's happening, sobbing for twenty-

four hours straight, his face unrecognizable. Nicole keeps pushing the drama, then after forty minutes of silence changes her mind — she's still playing a hand, and she knows it, the cards hers to hold.

For a while, Eddie has to leave. It's tribal war, really — war or peace. I find myself in a kind of historical flashback, becoming the mediator in the negotiation: everything flashing at once, the Pueblo, the old relationship between Synergia Ranch and the Pueblo, our own reputation, and above all Nicole's ruthlessness in the moment. I keep sending her whatever I can from the heart. Will the heart win? Let your heart speak.

Everyone can cut the air with their emotions, thick as a dark cloud. We reach land and I keep asking Nicole, again and again, what she actually wants. She decides to put the drama to rest. It's the point of no return; I'm forced into drastic action, holding to words I don't much feel like standing behind. But this too shall pass, and the expedition will go on, with or without them.

Aitutaki

The wind chills the face — the coldest month of the year, twenty degrees Celsius at its lowest. The lagoon is almost fully enclosed, except for one tight pass leading to the dock; sailboats with two-meter drafts come in looking for shelter, though not all of them make it. The tide runs four, sometimes seven knots through the pass, and you can only enter at high water. One sailboat got stuck in the passage; for days afterward no other boat could get in or out. The anchorage outside the reef is poor, all coral formation — boats there couldn't leave either, their chain wrapped around huge coral heads, and we went out to dive two of them free. We're lucky: we're tied to a mooring, a big fat mooring, and we make the most of that luxury.

In Rarotonga we got caught by a freak storm out of the north — twenty-foot swells pounding, the anchor chain drawn as tight as it would go. Our zodiac flipped and drifted out over the breaking reef; by what miracle it survived we'll never know, but it did — it must have danced with the raging sea itself. The winch refused to take up the chain, and two lines got fouled on the prop. We hung there on the strength of the chain alone, carved through dead coral heads, while the rain flattened the edge of the swells just enough. It was the ride of a lifetime under the ship, cutting the ropes free of the propeller, every breath its own game of life and death, the wildest dragon ride — it plays out

mythologically in my head even now, but we survived it.

We forgot the first law of the sea: watch the weather with your whole being, no matter what anyone tells you, and when it comes to the elements, always make your own judgment. The element rules over everything else, and our big dreams only get realized when we stay in tune with it. Inside the shelter of a wall and a strong roof, the body stops receiving that information. I didn't expect anything like this, nobody did, but it came — that no one had seen a storm like it in this season is no excuse. We rode it out, the ship survived it, but it was a wake-up call. A man carries the whole hard drive inside him to see and feel and know intuitively — the work is to build the software and keep it running.

Nothing compares to what could have happened. We could have slipped the anchor, but once the lines were fouled on the prop, we'd lost that option; drop another anchor... we got our lesson. For five days Orla researched the weather stations and frequencies across the whole Pacific, and every day since we watch the highs and lows play out their opposition, their whirls and turns. We don't want to play with the sea like that again. The goal is to keep the voyage going, and going, but never gone — going out in some heroic last stand isn't the drama anyone wants to play. We all love heroes; they feed something in other men, and the entertainment industry keeps manufacturing

them because that's what we've decided we want to be. But a sea person isn't a hero. To survive, he'll sometimes play with his life, the way we all do — but a sea person needs to be wiser than that. He needs to know his own limits. Making the same mistake twice isn't necessary; evolution is the oldest game on earth, one generation learning from the best of the last. Anything less isn't good enough for an adventurer on this planet. We ride the new, or try to — riding your own path with new senses is the whole point.

We've lost some of our cultural diversity on board, replaced now by an American majority, teenagers mostly, many out of the school system and away from family for the first time. Still, the ones with the drive and the energy to jump in, to try something new, all carry the same dream — a dream of the planet ocean, of saving the coral reef. Action rules. I was raised in a culture of passion, a cult of it, a hunger to know and to experience, and I don't see that same hunger in this new generation.

I want to catch fish. That sentence alone is the whole foundation of the art of it — the know-how comes after. Always a student, ready to learn. Richard, from Marine Resources, came by one morning after hearing I hadn't caught a thing all week. Come let me see your lures, he said. Within the hour we had a rig set up to catch live bait, every rod loaded with the right line and a changeable lure for each fish — this one, yellow and silver with a hint of blue, good for tuna; the right-

sized hook, a swivel small enough to avoid drag, clear line with no wire. Then another rig for wahoo, and one more for mahi mahi. We set a line to run overnight off the stern, hooked to a buoy and a length of shock cord.

That night I rig a light off the stern, determined to catch bait fish. There was no way I was going to catch bait fish — trevally were jumping everywhere, faster than light, and no bait fish would come near my tiny hook. So I cast a shiny lure instead, as far out as I can throw it, in one clean motion, and reel it straight back. The pull comes suddenly; I have to wrap my whole body around the line to keep it tight. Close to the stern I haul him up onto the deck — a fifteen-pound big-eye trevally. The curse is broken. Not every cast strikes, and not every strike lands, but eight trevally end up on deck before I decide to call it a night. Adrenaline up, fingers sore, I stand there proud of it — more than just catching fish, providing for the clan, our sea-people clan. Enough for five days of protein from the sea. Nothing extraordinary for people who actually live on the water, but it's a reminder how much we rely on the land to feed us when we don't have to. We're at the source here.

It's a basic instinct, a lifeline. Mostly Westerners on board, so you have to get clever to keep the taste buds happy — spice the fish, fry it, bake it — but it's raw I can't get enough of. Since we arrived in Polynesia I can't help craving their raw fish salad: fresh lime wherever you can find it, and coconut cream.

The essence of survival on a South Pacific island.

I'm drawn in by a vahine straight out of a dream — the contact high of it, a sensual current my body answers with its own small, imperceptible vibration, energizing the whole of me. Like the taste of a great wine, I taste the essence of a goddess. I watch her dance, dance, an incarnation of legend. I watch her move, and now I can smell her skin, feel her hand in mine. Everyone is watching, so we keep the mask on, the "civilized" version of this encounter, while underneath it all runs in full sensual flood. Today I watched the sky, waiting to see her leave for New Zealand. The weather kept us apart, and I know the whole island watched our every move. It could only ever have existed in poetry, and in our dreams — a romantic universe. There's nowhere to hide here.

*Reflexion of the blue lights of the
lagoon,
Shines in your eyes,
The scent of tiare in your hair
Sends typhoons to my heart.*

*Tides going out,
The pass swells.
Tides coming in,
And all is well.
The canoe follows the rhythm of
moana,*

*Wind, bring me to the place I need
to be,
Fenua is where the heart is,
A blue planet, an ocean planet.*

I fish again that night. The weather is picking up, so all my attention stays on the wind and the swell — highs and lows visualized, eyes on the lines, the boat ready for anything. We're prepared this time; no surprise party like the one in Rarotonga.

A fisherman at the edge of the reef casts his line and pulls in a small fish. The fish starts to talk. *Please release me, I'm too small for you.* The fisherman agrees, and lets him go. The next day he casts in the same spot and pulls in the same small fish. This time he keeps him. The little fish protests: *I'm too small for you — why do you keep me now? Today, the fisherman says, I'm hungrier than yesterday.*

Two fishermen sit side by side at the same spot. One keeps pulling fish out; the other stands watching without a single bite. Back in the village, the empty-handed one asks the other his secret — some special magic, surely. *Not at all, the other says. I just hide my hooks better than you.*

Some fish circle a baited hook. One gets caught. Another sees the line, sees the hook, watches it for ten minutes with the most tempting bait still sitting there — and bites anyway. The two fish end up lying side by side.

The first one asks the other: *Didn't you learn anything when I got caught? Of course. But I couldn't resist.*

Two old shark legends, told to us along the way and worth setting down as they were given.

AKO

Ako walks along the beach. The storm has washed treasures up from the sea — shells fill his woven pandanus bag. He comes across a big shark, dying, the tide gone low around her. She is heavy with young, and calls him nearer, and he can hardly believe she has entered his mind to speak to him. "The tide is running lower, and you can see the full moon. Another shark, jealous, has decided to eat me and my babies — they're still inside me. Cut me open and choose the one with seven stripes on his body; keep the others to feed him until the next moon. He'll become your friend, as long as you keep our friendship secret. Hurry now, my time to pass to the other side is near. I won't harm you. I'm not tricking you."

Ako is afraid at first — he's heard the old men talk about sharks that were once men. "I can feel your hesitation, your fear. As long as you keep it secret, no one will ever harm you. You've been chosen, by coming here today. The stars don't lie. Hurry — the time for the birth of legends is narrow and short. You've been chosen to be a creator of your own future."

Ako takes up his obsidian blade, a gift from his grandfather, a gift that came from far away — never was a sharper blade made. It came from the belly of the earth, shaped by the gods of fire; for many moons the earth spat fire and gave birth to land, and for millions of moons more the gods worked the stone this blade was cut from. Man was called by the spirits and told to dig deep into the earth to find it. His ancestors traded their pottery for the stone, carving it irresistible and unique, and carried it home again after many more moons. "Never trade your blade," the shark tells him, "even when what's offered you seems impossible to refuse — no giant pearl, no new magic brought by people yet to come. Keep the blade, for it's the sacred link to your past, to the origin of our world, and if it disappears — like a word forgotten — the spirit dies with it."

The blade, black as a moonless night, opens the shark's belly without hurting her. Moonlight catches the steel and falls on the baby shark with the seven stripes; the other eight are already dead. Ako carries him to a secret place at the far end of the lagoon, and by the time he arrives the moon is going down. He builds a circle of stones in the shallow water to protect his new friend.

Each day, as the sun breaks over the far side of the sea, Ako feeds the baby shark with what remains of the others. Each day the shark grows bigger.

TAMAUI

Many moons ago, on the island now called Bora Bora, a little boy cries and cries on the beach at Farerua. No one hears him; he has been left alone.

One day he disappears — the ancestors of the sea have taken him down to Moana, the deep blue, to protect him.

A man named Tamaui finds a baby shark beside the marae, the sacred temple, at Farerua. Day after day he feeds it, watching it grow. One day the shark disappears.

A few days later it returns, grown into a giant twenty meters long. The man names him Tamaui, which means to continue, and the shark becomes a messenger, traveling to the Marquesas and to Hawai'i and bringing stories back to Bora Bora. He guides the sailing canoes too, leading them on their ocean voyages. When the leaves of the banyan tree turn yellow, the islanders know Tamaui has come home.

One day a man sets sail for Maupiti, for a wedding. The sea grows and grows; a huge storm takes him down, and his canoe sinks. Tamaui comes to the rescue, lifting him up and swimming him in to the beach at Maupiti. Then the great shark transforms into a man, walks up onto the sand, and speaks to the village: I am Tamaui — the small boy who once cried on the beach at Farerua.

The new moon disappears below the horizon. I cast a line off the stern with bait

caught fresh that morning, tied off to a buoy on a heavy line, hoping for a big yellowfin. An hour later I haul it in — the pull is heavy, and it's a big blacktip shark on the hook. Everyone gathers on deck, and the argument starts immediately. For some this is the worst possible thing, and just like that, from being the fisherman feeding our tribe, I become the bad guy. My first thought is to check whether the islanders eat blacktip and give it to them if they do; Carol jumps in saying you can't eat blacktip at all. Marco wants to bring it up on deck and work the hook out — he's never handled a shark in his life. Lindsey and Keely look at me like we're torturing a baby.

It's a good lesson, really, in how thoroughly we've brainwashed our own crew on the whole subject of sharks. Yes, let's not kill millions of them for their fins — but a shark is a shark, a genuinely dangerous animal if it's handled badly, and a shark with a hook in its mouth is not a happy shark. I enjoy the fight of it, the pull of the line, the thrill of the whole thing. I ask Orla to film it, but the moment doesn't want to be filmed — she never presses record. In the end I have to shut the whole deck down and cut the line as close to the hook as I safely can.

Phoenix Islands

The first instinct of any creature underwater is curiosity, not fear. Here, in uninhabited waters with no one hunting beneath the surface, the fish come close to look over the newcomer. The sharks all come to investigate too, not aggressive, simply curious — you meet their eyes. Huge trevally, jacks, rainbow runners, all come without fear. Unless you make some sudden movement, displacing water and sending out an aggressive charge, nothing down there is afraid of you, no matter how big you must look to them.

You're the alien here, truly — compressed air tanks, bubbles, noise, a face mask and gauges and plastic feet, slightly awkward, not displacing water very efficiently at all. Nothing down there is scared. Sharks swim straight through schools of fish, which simply part to let them by, and if a few need to die, the peace and order of the place doesn't break. There's a real, sensible balance to it.

We're trained to fear — sometimes for our own good, but too often on false grounds. I felt nervous myself at first. As we stop the zodiac at the edge of the reef, dozens of baby sharks rise to the surface, and my first instinct is to put something in the water and watch how they react. Then I go in myself, to see their behavior firsthand, before I give the okay for everyone else to follow.

Everything here is oversized, or grown to its full maturity — but the reef itself is dead. Why? There's no pressure from people here, not on this stretch, at least not now. So what's caused this coral cemetery? A dumping ground for explosives? Runoff from an old guano factory? Pollution, nuclear waste? There's no way to know just from looking at a dead reef. Judging by the fish themselves, their abundance and their size, the place should be pristine. Something went wrong here.

The wind picks up and we abort our stop at Phoenix Island. A frigate bird comes over in the shape of the phoenix itself, keeping the symbol alive.

At Enderbury the reef is dying too — so much of it dead and taken over by algae that it seems impossible anyone could file a report calling it healthy, pristine even, but that's exactly what happened after an expedition here in 2000 or 2002. Pollution — but pollution from what? The reef feels wrong in some way I can only call intuitive. Having now seen a good stretch of the South Pacific, including places far more heavily touched by people, something clearly went wrong here.

None of which stops the diving from being superb — sharks, four whitetips following us the whole dive, blacktips and grey reef sharks besides, an almost absurd abundance of red snapper, though no grouper at all. Rainbow runners have traveled with us all the way from Sydney Island to Enderbury. We lower the

boat to troll for our dinner, but today it's Eddie, Starlight, and Nada who come back with three yellowfin instead — sashimi for dinner. Birds are everywhere; we play with the frigate birds, feeding them, thirty of them circling the ship in welcome.

We are contemplating the giant rollers coming from far away, crashing on the reefs of Nikumaroro. The island is turning away from the sun, and the light is fading.

*The black bullets,
Mother and calves,
Sighing.*

Curious.

The pod introduces itself.

The marlin comes in.

Closer and closer.

His big spear menaces.

*A tingle of fear, and what if.
Electric.*

*The false killer whale sends the
killing cry.*

I am saved.

The smell of blood.

The feast.

*The sight of twenty whales tearing
apart the four-meter fish.*

The call of the wild.

*A last goodbye, with jumps and
splashes.*

*We follow the rising moon to guide
us back to the ship.*

Kanton

We're greeted by a pod of bottlenose dolphins, with the pod's leader making special contact — a meter off, checking us over twice, before bringing in the rest of the pod, twelve of them, including a baby just born.

The anchorage is a tough one. In the pass, a current of seven knots runs in and out of the lagoon; we anchor on the shelf, twenty meters down, where it's safe as long as the wind holds out of the east but would turn dangerous in anything southerly — miss the shelf and it drops away steeply. We sit facing the open ocean, and the activity around the ship never stops: tuna cruising by, dolphins coming around at sunset and through the night, trevally, and our own little school of rainbow runners, picked up back at Sydney Island, that has more or less adopted the ship and stayed with us since. While we clean the day's catch, baby sharks come in to eat the scraps; we catch trevally at night. The ship ends up surrounded by long strings of worms — Starlight scoops one up and we all marvel over it for a while.

It feels like the end of the world here — wrecked cars, an old depot, fuel tanks, satellite dishes, a huge airfield, all in a state of decay, though the airfield could apparently still take a landing from the space shuttle. Trash is everywhere, relics of the Second World War scattered through it.

Thirty people live on the island, seven couples and their children, all employees of the Kiribati government — the diesel man, the radio operator, the teacher, the carpenter, the nurse, the organizer. No one is called a fisherman, or a boat driver, or a dancer, because everyone here can do all of it. It's simply part of the culture.

We do very well fishing here. Eddie is king fisherman for the moment, since he can't dive — he burst his ear back in Tokelau. Around sunset we set off following the birds and catch seven yellowfin, a rainbow runner, and a barracuda; another boat runs alongside us but keeps having trouble with its shaft, and we end up towing it back through the rapids of the pass, trading three tuna for a stick of tobacco and an Irish cake. The next day we catch six more yellowfin. The deck turns into a permanent cleaning station, sashimi on the menu every day.

Today the island puts on a feast for us. We're picked up in a broken-down car towed by a tractor — ten of us, plus a lone sailor and a family of four off another boat, husband and wife and two kids. Pure Gilbertese style: we sit in an open-air house while the food is laid out, formal greetings and introductions first. The spread is impressive — huge lobster, pig and breadfruit, cooked pumpkin and papaya. The men eat with us while all the kids sing and dance, and then everyone performs a piece in turn — song, dance, the energy building and building until every person there has had their

moment on the stage, and the stage reveals something of the inner life of each of them. No one here knew each other before this evening, but the magic of the occasion and its own shape becomes something real on its own.

Back on board, then a dive with mating turtles — but the reef is dead again. Fish are everywhere, though the islanders have started catching sharks here too, selling the fins and drying the meat for rougher weather ahead. The place teems with life, and we're left wondering, again, what happened to this reef. How does a scientific expedition give a reef like this a clean bill of health? It's been untouched by fishing for a while, but the coral has suffered all the same — it reminds me of symptoms we've seen at Manus, where a huge American military base was once set up. This place is so far out of the way that no one would ever know what kind of experiment might have happened here.

On the stern, the American contingent sings karaoke off a laptop, and inwardly it disappoints me — we could make our own music if we wanted to sing. They get loud, and they can't stop talking, even at the feast; they seem to need to fill any silence with either small talk or noise. Sitting quietly is beyond them. Johnny, and Synergia with him, once had the genius idea of keeping our own dinners silent — most cultures eat in silence, or hold off on conversation at the table, because food is too important not to actually

pay attention to, and so is conversation, if you really mean it.

Every evening, an hour before sunset, we meet a family of bottlenose dolphins. They ride the bow and I get in the water with them; day after day they come closer and closer. The day before we leave, real physical contact is made.

*Keep the song of the lagoon alive,
With fish and clams and dreams,
And at night, the melodies of
birds,
The waves meeting the beach.*

*Keep the song of the coconut
husks,
Sing with the fire,
Pandanus shades,
Cast your nets for mullets,
Harvest the laulau,
Hunt the coconut crabs,
And sing to the moon.*

*Don't let the planes steal the song
of the birds,
The hotels steal the coconut crabs
for overpriced meals,
Don't let anyone rape your land,
Paradise is fragile,
Don't let the stereo steal the
fatele,*

*Don't let huge ships destroy your
coral reef,
Oil companies pollute your lagoon,
And above all, don't let the spirit
that keeps you alive die.*

*Listen to the voice of the lagoon,
And if the lagoon screams and
hurts,
Listen to the voice of the lagoon.
The sun and the moon,
They are friends that you can keep
forever,
Only if you take care, and respect
them.*

Tokelau

*The deep blue meets the shore,
Coral reefs, the protector, the
provider, sing to the hull of the
Heraclitus.*

*Anchored on the lee of Atafu,
We are protected from the easterly
swells.*

*Hospitality is the highest game in
town,*

*Teaching us, reminding us where
we come from.*

Homo pacificus,

A multitalented survivor.

*We dance the old gestures, how to
catch a turtle,*

*A flashback to Mbabanga in the
Solomons.*

Coconuts flood the ship,

*Every fisherman drops part of his
catch on board.*

*The blues of the lagoon entrance,
The life-giving lagoon, when the
open sea crashes on the outer
reef.*

Coconut crab, a delicacy.

*The priest comes to bless the ship,
Not with hallelujahs but with the
old farewell to the mariner,
Calling for the right winds, asking
the ocean to be good to us.*

*We learn to harvest fish, following
the food chain,
Bait fish before sunrise, troll for
tuna as the sun comes up.
Every move dictated by the tide.
The lagoon is always full, emptying
into the open sea,
The warmed water spilling out
between the coral cathedral.
The reef teems with sharks — a
healthy sign, the big predators not
gone yet.*

A conversation from around then,
overheard or half-remembered, the kind the
ship seemed to specialize in producing.

— Do you mean that would be enough to
satisfy you, or are you making a conscious
decision to be satisfied?

— How can you stay so cheerful, knowing
what's actually going on?

— Tell me, then. What is going on.

— Global warming isn't a myth. It's real.

— Whose reality?

— Come on. Don't be such a mind fuck
about it.

— Fine. The earth is warming, sea levels
are rising, a handful of coral atolls will
disappear, a few million people will need to

relocate. The exodus might build fortified, luxury ghettos for the privileged few holding on to a dying lifestyle, while everyone outside them has to self-organize or die. Weather prediction on a global scale becomes the most valuable knowledge there is; wars get fought over water and what's left of the resources. At the same time, other people might evolve into fully artificial environments — computer worlds, mind disconnected from body, maybe even cloned into artificial copies of themselves, another step toward immortality, Gilgamesh all over again. It won't stop. Losing cultural diversity? New culture will grow in its place. Mutants. All you're doing right now is being nostalgic for a past that was always doomed.

— But I want to be human. I want to enjoy everything there is to enjoy — my own emotions. We're losing our senses, day after day. I want to feel and experience the act of eating a mango, drinking a fresh coconut, the alchemy of a fresh-caught fish marinated in lime. I want to love. I want to know I'm alive. I want to dream the biggest dream I can dream.

— You're a utopian. Man has never learned. The few who understand power use everything they have to hold on to it. As psychology advanced and the workings of the mind came into view, new techniques emerged to keep people in their cage — a cage of belief. The church and organized religion knew that all along; now they compete with giant corporations broadcasting their own messages

across whatever networks they control, feeding the masses exactly the information they want heard. And if a few rebellious avant-gardists gain too much ground, put the fear back into everyone else — the suffocation technique, nothing new about it at all, the ruling class has run the same strategy for millennia. One day you'll die. And then what?

— The world needs its avant-garde — the ones running ahead of the rest of us into the future. Without them there is no future; the energy has nowhere to transform into. We build the foundation. We're doomed to keep running, because if we stop, we get caught, and we die. The old symbols have mostly been abused and stolen, their meaning twisted and drowned, until no one remembers what they were ever supposed to mean — a kind of prostitution of symbols. The only answer is making new ones, faster than the old ones can be corrupted.

London

The winds are against us, fog wraps around us like a cocoon — a cold cocoon, come down from the north, from where the ice meets the sea. We've lost our foremast, sail and all. So we'll cross the Pacific under a single sail, and a voyage already long becomes, overnight, an eternity. Sperm whales pass by in their dozens, and the sea boils with dolphin pirouettes. The dolphins meet the horizon. Curious seals come to say good morning, sometimes good evening, to amuse us, and how they do amuse us. The sea, the ocean, is also the voyage inward — the luxury of time that lets you bend with it. Warm, wrapped in heavy blankets, below the level of the sea, a cold sea of ten degrees, I remember. I remember. And I set off on a voyage.

London. I step off the train at Victoria Station, one suitcase in hand, free. An angel hands me the keys to her flat.

I meet Véronique, and we become a couple — not an ordinary one, but a couple. We live together, in the same bed, in a house kept by a witch of a landlady. But we build our own paradise inside it. And yet we set sex aside. And yet we make love, just in another way, that's all.

I remember the divine baths, when my angel would come and bring water heated on the stove. I remember the warmth of her body,

coming home on the last night bus after a hot night at Ronnie Scott's.

As for me, I'm a bit wild. I spend my nights with the night, in the jazz clubs, sometimes a conquest, though never really wanting one. I become a man.

Véronique is my own kind of dream — the luxury of being able to exist, free, without constraint. Conversations that run until first light, an alliance with my own country, which matters, since I have so little of it. And then, the friendship between a man and a woman — that's sacred. After so much travel and adventure, I've managed to hold on carefully to the lessons in living that we shared.

Pieces of life, essences. Like the crème fraîche at your parents' place in Normandy. The icy slap of wind on a beach, the grey waves breaking on the shore. Then Paris. Then forgetting.

The memories surface, always by surprise. What comes after is a conscious choice — to let them vibrate through the body, or not. It takes so little to bring a moment back to life. A word, a smell, an image, a sound.

It's been three months now that we've been at sea. Three months without land. Three months with the same faces, only to realize they're never quite the same. And yet you fix on an image, held in the mind, waiting for another to take its place. I remember your

face, even knowing life will have changed it by now.

*I never tire of your gaze,
since I've given it my soul.
Your moods intoxicate me,
until I stop thinking of tomorrow.*

*I love you the way one loves time
itself,
unconcerned with the soul,
unconcerned with tears.
I love your gusts of wind,
when the waves break over the
bow,
you rise up and drive me wild,
I love your dazzling calm,
when my memory comes flooding
back
so I won't let it die,
or lose it,
unable to relive it,
unable to grow drunk
on oceanic melody,
since it's to you that my shadow
belongs.*

Western Samoa

In the crowded harbor of Apia I feel like a sardine in a can. We move the ship almost every other day — dock to clear, undock, dock to fuel, undock, dock to load supplies, undock — dragging anchor while huge container ships arrive one after another.

Wind from every direction on the compass, and rain, rain, rain. Samoa hadn't seen rain in six months before we arrived; the famous waterfalls had dried down to a trickle, and the river emptying into the harbor swelled and swelled, logs cruising past the ship one after another, turning the whole harbor into a mud bath. We make the best of it, collecting rainwater by the bucketful — we can't run the desalinator in this, but the biosphere provides.

The market is my favorite place to spend time — the fish market first. Sit down at the kava circle and you could meet anybody: a member of parliament, political discussion on the likely future of the South Pacific, the latest upheaval in French Polynesia, thirty thousand people demonstrating in the streets of Papeete. The Polynesians want their future in their own hands. Samoa was first, and paid a price for it — poor, by Western standards, but they've kept their know-how, and the fruit market shows it: a whole hand of bananas costs two to five US dollars here, where we needed forty in French Polynesia.

The biggest business here is churches — more of them competing, rising up on every corner. At the market on Fridays and Saturdays, the different congregations work the crowd trying to recruit new members, full bands and all. We arrive during White Sunday, the day set aside for the children; Orla and I go to church and watch the dramas, the songs, the speeches given by the youngest kids.

Je ne savais pas pour combien de temps je garderais ton regard en mémoire. L'océan lave mon âme, et toi tu y restes. Surprise, puisque ce sont les trois centres qui s'en souviennent et continuent d'en « jouir ». Inscrit dans mon corps, sensation d'adolescent romantique, hypnose. L'envie d'écrire des chansons d'amour, puisque je vis, je vis.

I didn't know how long I'd keep your look in memory. The ocean washes my soul, and you stay there anyway. Strange, since it's the three centers of me that remember it, that go on savoring it. Written into my body, an adolescent's romantic feeling, hypnosis. The urge to write love songs, because I'm alive, I'm alive.

Tuvalu

A Closing Fragment

Tuvalu, December 2004 to March 2005.

The smallest island nation in the world, and Tuvalu is big news — not for its size, but because it would likely be the first nation to disappear entirely if sea levels rise, in part from global warming. Global warming has been slow to get accepted as real, but the facts speak for themselves by now; all around the planet, the signs keep piling up.

More than the sea level itself, the immediate threat to Tuvalu comes first through changing weather — more frequent typhoons, stronger storms. It's a poor nation, living off foreign aid, its fishing rights sold off to Japan for next to nothing.

Life here is changing fast — overcrowding in the capital, Funafuti, a dependence on foreign imports just to eat, the tropical paradise already gone. Trash litters the island; villages are built on top of the dump. The government blames the Americans for wrecking the most fertile land to build an airstrip, digging huge holes through the middle of the islands that now seep salt water. We couldn't even buy a bunch of bananas, papaya, or a coconut. What is going on here?

We enter the pass of the atoll of Nukufetau.