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

Lynn Fels

English Bay, 1976, International 14

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kingston 1975, International 14

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

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

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

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

Sailing into the protected harbour of the Kingston yacht club requires

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

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

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

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

Lac Montauban, 2004, International 14

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

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

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

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

English Bay, 2008, International 14

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

by vocabulary flubs such as "back of the boat" or "pull in the jib rope." To use the terms of stern and bow and sheet is to announce your arrival into the serious play of sailing.

Gulf Islands, Summer 1976, Tirik

On the west coast, as newlyweds, we share a weekend's sail with a former salmon fisherman, met on a bicycle camping trip—an invitation born of a conversation on a shell-strewn beach on Galiano Island, as we eyed *Tirik*, a low-slung 28 foot vessel bobbing at anchor—"you like her?" he asks, "she's mine." We rope our bicycles onto the rear railing, and set off for an impromptu sailing. Early Saturday morning, he interrupts our conversation over bagels and coffee with a shout, "Damn it! The tide's changing!"

Startled, we look at the innocuous water, only moments earlier, a calm swell of morning liquid light, now sucking vigorously along the length of the boat's hull. Coffee spilling, he leaps out of his boat, the receding water already barely waist-high. "Come on, we've got to steady her, she'll be sitting in the mud in no time," and frantic, we prop the vessel up with sea-weary logs; she rests unsteady on her keel and make-shift support, as the sea drains from the bay where we'd moored the night.

A good day's sailing lost, we sit on his disabled boat drinking quince wine that his wife makes from the quince bush that stands outside their kitchen door in Richmond. Reminiscing, he tells us of the nurses who once joined him on their shifts off after his wife could no longer sail with him. They would swim naked, he tells us, alongside his boat, "like seals, they were," but that was then, and now he has only us and waiting for the returning sea.

At night, he unsettles the black water with the swirl of a paddle, bioluminescent sea creatures sparkling. On Sunday afternoon, we jig for cod, and snag a barnacle-encrusted rock hauled up from the sea floor, that now sits thirty years from that catching on our fireplace mantle. Each weekend, during the sailing months, his wife waits for his return in the bungalow they built outside the perimeters of the International Vancouver airport. Here, the planes, lowering their landing carriages, cast shadows on the grass, their presence so close to us, that on our first visit, we duck, unable to judge the distance between a screaming jet and ourselves sitting below on lawn chairs.

Juxtaposed between sea and sky, those who pilot planes sail the sky, factoring headwinds and tailwinds into arrival times, while thousands of feet below, we cross the Georgia Strait, our timetable subject only to a failing evening wind, the fall of light, and the endless pull of the tide. There is always the motor that can be started, and in the chug, chug, chug, that accompanies us through the dampening chill of evening, we turn towards Burrard Inlet, passing under the steel girders of the bridge as cormorants attend our passage eyes unblinking.

Lac Montaubon, 1971, Bottom's Up

My passion for wind and sailing across bodies of water begins in my sixteenth year, on summer weekends when I join my family up at the lake after working in the office of the local board mill. Here at the lake in August, the winds are devious, blustering and unreliable; they drop abruptly as we struggle to catch our breath, our arms aching from pulling on the sheets, red-blistered skin raw, as we warily watch the catpaws scurry menacingly across the water.

My brother and dad built from a kit, a mirror dingy with red sails and a blue hull, which was later christened Bottom's Up, a reminder of that day when sailing with my brother, an errant shift of wind swung the boom across, knocking me down onto the deck. "Get up! Get up! Get on the other side of the boat, we're going over!" my brother shouts in panic as slow motion we spill into the water, the boat turtles, turtling still, mast pointing downwards to the bottom of the lake, red sails flapping impotently underwater.

Surfacing from under the tangle of sheets and sails, spluttering, we clamber onto the hull, seize the centreboard, lean our weight backwards, coaxing the boat to roll over, and slowly, slowly, she rises upright, mast and sails sodden with the weight of the lake, as we scramble for the emerging gunwales, then flinging ourselves aboard, we gather sheets to regain position. This relationship that emerges between ourselves and the wind, the response of our craft in answer to both wind and sailor, is a constant struggle, until we learn how to interpret the codes of the lake's environment. To read the wind's intent, we must attend to the bending of branches running along the shore, the shifting patterns of the water's surface, the warning luff of sails.

Lac Montaubon, Summer 1988, Bottom's Up

In my late twenties, I learn to sail my brother's boat single-handedly, manipulating the jib and main sheets and tiller in a complicated choreography that sets the boat on a reach, ninety degrees to the wind. The sailing winds on the lake are like a capricious lover, quick-tempered, languid, attentive, and at times irritatingly absent. To sail in response, in conversation with the wind, is a different kind of dialogue. You have to listen with your skin, feel the breeze across your cheek, anticipate the strength of argument before the gusts arrive, keep a look-out for wind clues, such as the rippling of water or rustling of leaves, seek out the direction that the flag is flying, attend the lean of hull and counter-leaning body, as the wind fills or abandons the sails.

Falling in love is like this, exploring new territories that shift within our presence, temporal engagements, calling us to be wary of contradicting nuances. Falling in love as a sailor requires an immediate intimacy with wind and water and boat and geography, an embodied collaboration that moves us across spaces that acknowledge our presence—an interruption in the passage of wind, our wake a temporal tracing on water. Each encounter marked by presence and wind, brings with it a new conversation.

One afternoon, a south wind rises—a rare wind that comes from Montreal pavements as hot winds travel from the south, bringing news of an urban summer heat wave to cottage dwellers. My seven-year-old daughter and I set off in my brother's dinghy determined to sail through the narrow passage where the fire tower cottage squats on the beach and down past the rock cliffs into the next bay, a distance of four miles. Two hours later, we beach at a deserted cottage at lake's end and scratch our names with sticks in the sand. *We were here.*

Homeward, we navigate the waters beneath watchful hills. As shadows lengthen across the lake, after a brief early evening rally in response to the cooling air, the wind falls and I position my daughter at the bow, her arms wrapped around the mast to read the telltales so that I might navigate the dying of wind. Consultation of the telltales, ribbons on the forefront of the jib, allow the sailor to readjust the boat's cant to the wind, hand on tiller. Even perceived constancy of wind requires subtle nuances of response. Telltales fluttering upwards tell the sailor that the sailboat is sailing too close to the wind; downwards, and the tiller needs adjustment to turn the boat into the wind. My daughter's voice sings our journey homeward. On shore her father sets a bonfire, and shines a flashlight into the deepening darkness, a light to guide us home.

Lake Montaubon, Summer 2005, International 14

In sailing, there are few artifacts of arrival and departure, the temporal wake that our boat marks on water so quickly erased by winds and waves.

Yet there is one memory retrieved during a late night of sorting old family videos that reminds me of who we are in the presence of the wind, with the shifting of surface beneath our feet. A hot summer day at my parents' cottage captured on my son's video camera records a moment's grace in that summer's sailing, three years ago, as we rig the sailboat one last time before we have to fly back to Vancouver. We convince our teenage son to bring the video camera down to the beach to film us as we set out to sail. "Just for a few minutes," we entreat. "Something to prove that we were here." *To mark our presence in this place when time forgets us*.

"Hey, Dad, take off your sunglasses!" My daughter yells from her beach chair, as my son, grumbling, brings the video camera to his eye. "Are you filming?" she demands of her brother, sibling rivalry tempered in their desire to secure this unexpected pairing of parents on video—too often this summer, one or the other has been absent, strolling the beach, or reading, refusing to be captured in a viewfinder. "Mom, lean out, look this way. Dad, hold your course. Don't tack yet, you need to come closer to the beach," and as the beach looms into presence, seeking to impress my children, I stretch full out on the trapeze into a wind that struggles to hold me, falters, then fails. Weight misplaced, my foot slips on the gunwale, and I tumble, a comic slow-motion exit, from the boat, and then I am in the water, still attached to the trapeze, turning and gasping for air like a frantic cod on the end of a hook.

My son continues filming, my daughter screaming from her vantage point on the beach.

Time stills, as the sailboat rocks precariously. Then Martin holds out a hand, and in a simple flow of movement from water to boat, I rise up to him, as he pulls me to him, and we sail beyond the camera's focus, an impossible recovery, a moment of grace, in which the wind and boat reach an unexpected balance, as I emerge from the lake, to enter again into partnership.

Vancouver, Fall 2008, in Harbour

I watch this videoed moment of rescue on my laptop over and over again, a simple gesture of offering and receiving as he reaches out to me, as I come to him.

How odd, entering into a conversation of place and literature and ecology has brought me to a site of memory, remembered movements of recognition traveled through narratives of sailing: as husband and wife encounter a moment's grace; as brother and sister upright a sailboat toppled by an errant wind; as a child standing at the bow calls out her reading of telltales, so infinitely minute is the whisper of wind that accompanies us in our seeking home. This terrain of writing offers a gift of recognition, a recovery of love and memory within geographies of movement.

Narratives are shaped by the geographies and ecologies of places we travel in relationship with others as we move through terrains of human experience, desire, hunger, loss, and recovery in embodied conversations with wind and sea, earth, and sky—places of encounter we inhabit that embrace and challenge our presence. It matters how the wind is shaped by my presence, how I am called to attention by the wind. An ecology of presence requires that I pay close attention to the bodies of water on which I travel, as they are navigated by sailing winds, in relationship with others, past and present—my being present in intimate reciprocity in movement over time and place and memory.

Vancouver, Fall 2007, International 14

I explain, when neighbours inquire about my husband's absence, that he is bringing our International 14 back to Vancouver, where we once sailed her in the 70's when we were students in university. The sailboat has been most recently stored in my parents' garage in Ottawa, following the boat's demasting three summers ago at my parents' cottage, the rigging damaged in a violent windshift. Transporting our sailboat across the country from Ottawa to Vancouver requires the rental of a van, and eight days of lost vacation time, as Martin drives in both directions.

On the return trip, the boat and twenty-five foot mast are fastened to the roof rack by rope, a red flag attached to the end of the mast, a cautionary sign,

as the vehicle sails the country's geography. This is a different kind of sailing; the hull turned turtle rooftop, my husband navigates a narrow river of pavement, the TransCanada highway, across the windswept prairies, through the mountain passes, along the Fraser River, towards home.

On the morning of his return, I wait on the front steps of our house. The former owner painted the exterior walls blue, so bold a blue it looks as if a piece of the sky has fallen into our front yard. At night, with all its windows ablaze with light, the house, with its upper floor balcony decks, looks like a ship, sailing the black sky. My husband's arrival is announced by the sound of tires on gravel and the slow clicking exhale of an overheated motor. Our sailboat has returned to the West Coast and I go to her with the awkwardness of an anxious lover—so touched am I by this homecoming, his bringing her to me, that I weep, running my hand along her travel-dulled hull. "We have to wax her," he says, "and repair the mast before we put the her in the water." His voice suggests a weariness that goes beyond the kilometers he has driven, a travelling through recalculated time and unfamiliar geographies, brief narratives in his retelling.

He arranges for the sails to be repaired, new rigging for the mast. "The guy promised she'd be ready for sailing in a couple of days," he replies to my inquiries, as September slips away. But finally, she is returned to us, and we unload her down at Jericho beach. The windsock on top of the yacht club flaps erect in a brisk west wind. "10, 15 knots," my husband says, checking the wind scale, "we can manage it," and releasing her at the water's edge, we reintroduce $E = mc^2$ to English Bay. I reach for the jib sheet, as Martin takes the tiller in hand, habits of engagement choosing our positions.

We had forgotten in her absence the intimacy of encounter that comes in movement through geographies of place. We had forgotten how time releases its hold, the hours disappearing into tacks, and gybes, and long reaches across the bay as sailing recalls us to ourselves. Our relationship has been a lifetime of negotiating our presence in bodies of water, in response to sailing winds; it has been but a moment's stop.

We sail her within movements of anticipation and immediacy, our bodies responding with an embodied recognition that comes to us with ease. Is it possible that we wear our younger bodies so close beneath our skin that this movement into wind can bring us home yet again to ourselves and to each other? "Get ready to go out on the trapeze," he advises, "wind's rising," but I am already swinging out over the water, feet firmly planted on the gunwale, opening my arms wide to encounter the wind at the moment of its arrival.

"Hold fast!" he yells, and it surprises us, this coupling of ourselves in concert with water, wind, and craft, my body arching over water, secured by a single line up to the mast, his hand, determined on the tiller, our faces turning to the oncoming wind. A seal comes to air, a good luck sign, and wide-awake, we enter into dialogue with the sea, as a brilliant west wind carries us for this moment on a fine reach across the bay.