

For my sailing friends

Sailing the starboard tack,
fresh breeze on our faces –

“Prepare to tack.”

“Ready.”

“Helm’s a lee.
Tighten that sheet.
It’s close haul on a port tack.”

The bow lifts over the wave
and ploughs into the trough.
Water sprays across the deck.
We cross his bow and the race is on

at Townsend, Kerr, Norman, Smith or Jordan,
at Beaufort, Oriental, Edenton, or New Bern,
the Hoop Pole, the Great 48 or Old Frosty,
two boats or 42 boats
round the marks, jibe the booms and fly the spinnakers.

A near gale of strange words and phrases,
older than memory,
inherited from generations of wind chasers,
dreamers and drunkards, pirates and craftsmen.

Seasons of the moon fly on the wind:
full, half, quarter, new,
waning and waxing,
carrying the tides across the sounds and up the rivers,
flood tide, slack water and race,
set a double anchor and beware the full moon.

Water is three quarters of the earth's surface,
yielding the ghost of old salts
to be chased down the creeks and rivers, across the bays and sounds,
skirting the rocks, spits, bars and reefs,
seeking the shifting inlets and hidden channels
to harbors big and small, famous and infamous:
Silver Lake, Wicomico – Greater or Lesser,
Slaughter Creek or Mobjack Bay,
south of the Patuxent and west of the Choptank - Little or Big,
sailing my phantom skipjack and
grateful for my lazy jack.

Lazy: the genoa hangs limp.
The boom drifts to port, then back to starboard.
Sheets dangle limp – no force, no tension, no go.
Crack the beer, lay back and dream
of ten thousand diamonds scattered
across the water by the afternoon sun.

A light breeze brushes the skin of my imagination:
Pop the spinnaker out of the forward hatch of the dream
and feel the bow lift through the colors, the water and the wind -
a sailing dream with motion and sound,
rhythmical, varying in pitch and hue.

Or is it a dream?
Steered by sensations to Hurricane Marina
or a hurricane hole, but hopefully, not a hurricane?

No, it is not a dream.
The flag has dropped and the horn sounded.

“Head up! Head up!
Watch the telltales.
Tighten the sheet and hike out.
We're going close haul.”

- John M. Hemphill