

# CROSSING ALBA

Morven Gregor. Gerry Loose  
Ian Stephen. Emmanuelle Waeckerlé



21 August - 18 September

2010

## INTRODUCTION

*Crossing Alba* is a multi-faceted installation, inspired by two concurrent and contrasting voyages which crossed Scotland, from East to West, in Easter 2010.

At its root, was a proposal made some nine years ago by Gerry Loose, Ian Stephen and Morven Gregor to make artwork as they rowed together along a canal.

However, during its period of incubation, much water flowed under many bridges, encompassing for example, *Confluence*, based on three sea voyages suggested by three Gaelic texts, undertaken by Ian Stephen and partner artists in 2007 for Taigh Chearsabhagh, and *From Kyoto to Carbeth : poems and plants from the hills*, an exhibition of ceramics, ikebana, calligraphy, photography and poetry created by Gerry Loose and Morven Gregor in collaboration with Japanese artists for the Collins Gallery and the Scottish Poetry Library in 2008.

*Crossing Alba* developed into a project of many, complimentary threads involving four artists working in various practices: Ian Stephen a former coastguard, from the isle of Lewis, is a poet, storyteller, author and playwright. Emmanuelle Waeckerlé, based in London and France, produces artists' books and works in film, photography and performance. Gerry Loose, living in and around Glasgow, is a poet and horticulturist who often combines these two disciplines. Morven Gregor, also Glasgow based, is a photographer

and artistic director of the *Birds of Paradise* touring Theatre Company.

The launch of the project in Grangemouth, involved the first stages of the row and all four artists sharing stories of legendary voyages to St Kilda and from the top of Scotland to Limfjord in Denmark. This culminated in the production, by Ian and Emmanuelle, of two short films, two printed charts comprising text in Gaelic and Doric, and an installation of printed garments.

Ian and Emmanuelle then headed north and joined by Ian's son Sean, embarked upon their journey in *El Vigo*, a small wooden yacht, across the challenging seas between Stromness and Stornoway. It was to prove a prolonged voyage of over 40 hours which tested the physical and mental endurance of all involved, as recorded in their photographs, film, illustrated logs and images of text messages sent south.

Meanwhile, Gerry and Morven, set off on an altogether quieter journey in *An Bàta Bhan*, rowing for nine days along the Forth and Clyde canal towards Bowling, accompanied the *Peccadillo*, the barge which provided their floating accommodation. Less distracted by ferocious elements, they had more time and opportunities to engage directly with the passing landscape and people encountered along the way. Each day was marked by a specific task as well as the release of a small toy boat which in turn, inspired a series of photographs, poems, prose, performance and sculptural work.

*Crossing Alba* began and ended with both legendary and actual voyages but ultimately, its material content was determined by the elemental and how the artists absorbed and interpreted their experiences, to create a highly intuitive, diverse and often surprising, collection of work.

Laura Hamilton  
Curator  
Collins Gallery  
August 2010

## **A good traveller has no fixed plans and is not intent on arriving. Lao Tzu**

The year I was born, Frank Loesser wrote the song *Slow Boat to China*, which my mother sang to me throughout my childhood.

Travel since then has got faster but no farther. Slow travel as a notion has yet to catch on; very few people regard a journey as an end in itself. To do something utterly unnecessary for the sake of doing it, for the pleasure and discoveries it may bring may strike many as foolish.

To row a boat for nine days to see what happens and as an artwork in and of itself may likewise strike some as odd, even eccentric. But the roots of art are in play and as the notion of rowing across Scotland through the then newly re-joined Forth & Clyde and Union canals was discussed, we never asked why; just when.

Slow travel – rowing at a speed that an unoccupied flaneur could match – takes time to arrange.

I reckon that it's taken the three of us (Morven Gregor, Ian Stephen and myself) nine years to organise the nine day row which we finally undertook in April 2010.

Our plans changed, mutated, grew and shrank again until nothing remained except the row itself. In this way, plans became part of the row, the work in progress. The actual row, over Easter, was the concrete realisation of our mutual acts of dreaming it into existence.

The fact that as yet we had no boat, nowhere to stay for nine days and that at each canal lock we would need to portage a heavy boat (which we did not yet possess) made it all the more engaging.

The logistics of a trip are the least interesting, to me at least. I pack a bag and go. But for the row, to mention it to others was to elicit offers of help – for a sort of floating hotel to be moored each night (the barge *Peccadillo*) for our comfort; for help in carrying a boat round locks (thirty eight in all) and any amount of encouragement from other boats and boating people (for example the beautiful half-scale replica Clyde Puffer *Wee Spark* accompanied us some way). When this failed and it sometimes did, we threw ourselves on the kindness of strangers, many of whom helped us lift, manoeuvre and refloat our white boat, entirely taken up by that set of circumstances: and never once were we asked why.

The boat also was at length offered – the final necessity - and we could not have wished for a sweeter boat to row. Built on the lines of a traditional Faroese rowing boat, double ended, she floated on the water as light as a swan and fairly flew like one at the touch of the oars. I asked her name and after a pause came the reply: the white boat. I named her there and then *An Bàta Bhan* and she is the white boat.

So, for nine days at Easter of the year, we slowly rowed, through rain, sun and wind across Scotland, east to west, from the Firth of Forth to the Firth of Clyde: from sea to sea. We accepted what came our way, talking to passersby, lock-keepers, dog-walkers, anyone who offered a good morning. We were on nodding acquaintance with herons and hares; we puzzled sheep and cattle. Beneath us swam pike and perch and dreaming carp drifted. We could not get lost. The canal kept us on the narrow if not the straight. We needed only the compass of imagination.

We just rowed. Slowly; stopping often to make a note or photograph – for that's what we do. In such circumstances, time, ever subjective, ceases to be important and all that's left is the matter in hand; the playing fully absorbed: a form of contemplative wonder.

There is no slower travel than one's own muscle; nothing is more uncertain than a journey on water, from which one never arrives.

At the same time as our row, another journey was being made in Ian's classic wooden boat *El Vigo*, also east to west, across the top of Scotland from Stromness to Stornoway against tide & weather: taking him away from the white boat.

Almost at the end of our planning period, the Brazilian artist Carla Zaccagnini made an interoceanic crossing of the Panama Canal, in the Atlantic-Pacific direction.

In spring 2011, *Peccadillo* will undertake a west coast odyssey from Greenock to Inverness, tiller under the sure hand of her skipper, Bev Schofield. At the exact time of our row, starting on the 1st April, Morven's brother Gordon sailed *FfreeFire 52* east to west in the South China Seas race.

Slowly our water-paths converge. Our row spins off into different scales, times and directions; we had no fixed plans then and still we enjoy what the day brings: preferring journeys to destinations.

Mother, I'm on the slow boat out on the briny, with a moon big and shiny



" . . . when a man has something to say, he seeks out an audience,  
yet a poet does the opposite . . . at a critical moment . . .  
[he] tosses into the ocean waves a sealed bottle, containing his name  
and a message detailing his fate." Osip Mandelstam

"A poem, as a manifestation of language and thus essentially dialogue,  
can be a message in a bottle, sent out in the – not always greatly hopeful  
– belief that somewhere and sometime it could be washed up on land,  
on heartland perhaps." Paul Celan

*to be inscribed on an inland oar*

**Salt**



# nine short rows

1

a sighting

**Firmament** into Carron

**Foxglove** into canal

stars under water  
dwelling reflected

making sermons  
to the fishes

breaking news

2

a gift

water over water  
two lines cross  
sweet canal above  
Bonny Water

silk tearing  
swans lifting  
**Flat Calm** sent off

waters voices  
waters sibilance  
riff of willows

in the frap & fret  
a worked eye  
a feather

is it one language  
inside another

3

an encounter

length of the line  
as long as the day ahead  
three geese heading north

seams of wake behind

birch bark  
sheep stare  
oak spar  
quarry scar  
deer poise  
alder carr  
an abandoned glove

**Rowan Tree** sent

inside another water  
waterboarding

while we row abeam  
a beam of sun  
to whom do we speak

## 4

a finding

a humble bee line  
three threads of bubbles astern  
long curves of curlew  
beak & call & flight  
standing hare  
staring heron

**Rose Haugh**

release

to waters  
to fishes

## 5

a mark

what of the quick & vital snail  
when she meets the thrush  
at her waterside anvil

**Full Moon** leaves

westerly movement  
vibrant  
spring equinox

## 6

a line

steps back

a scar a cut  
flowing  
coast to coast  
a short voyage  
for mending

far exile

a leaf trembles  
on the eddies  
white boat too

waters edge  
rises & falls

her arms  
thrown out  
in sleep  
still rowing

**Starwort** warped

**7**

a gesture

oystercatchers lament

oak from Pontypool  
& deer prints  
on Clyde shore

& the gear & clutter  
the pencil camera  
knife & key

**8**

a breath

***Rowan Tree***

returned

**9**

***Foam***

into Clyde

sea lock out  
with ***Seòl na Mara***  
water weed strings  
white boat  
the rope  
& the line of hills

painters  
& sweeps  
stowed

*the pikes remain thieves*



### **Friday- Watch your Wash**

14 Locks. Fast water. Bubbles. Pull you under. Weed on gates. Shifting horizons. Arrive Union pub at 1pm. Davy and Maureen there to say hello. Go for hot lunch. Why is a woman with big hair counting money bags? Why does she spray and polish the pool table? Why does she leave? Chef brings out grub. Great. Back to the boat. All three of us row towards Falkirk. Taking in a lot of water. Jarry: "concerning the Doctor's Boat which is a sieve." Abandon the threesome. Ian and Gerry take turns of rowing with me. Both have to scale down their pull power. Hmm, we'll find another way.

### **Saturday - If you don't keep moving you stiffen up**

Weather. Frosty morning. Light icing on the canal. Warm and sunny all day.

### **Sunday - Ripples spread outwards**

I ate & drank; mug of tea, one slice French toast, one slice toast and marmalade, coffee, a gifted crème egg, a walnut, blue cheese & pear salad, chips, Sicilian red wine, wafer egg, artichoke anti pasti, Prosecco, Mo' minestrone, St. Emilion, hazel cream cigar.

### **Monday - Hare and heron**

Rowing pattern. Gerry, Morven, Gerry.

### **Tuesday - Where are you?**

Encounters. Jimmy Mac., Samantha, Bryan, Antonia, Rosie, Mary and her daughter, Adrienne, Ali, Helen, Larry, Greyhound couple, Jakies, Fisherfolk, wee fat boy and his pal.

### **Wednesday - It's just a paper boat**

Dalmuir drop lock. Lots of rain. No arranged help. Persuade two shoppers to stop. Lad helps pull boat onto land. Off they go with their messages. Problem. Two of us, one boat, two lock gates, one main road. Waiting in the wet. No-one passes. Garage ahead. I'll chance my arm. Three mechanics to the rescue. Dalmuir safely negotiated.

### **Thursday - Interim**

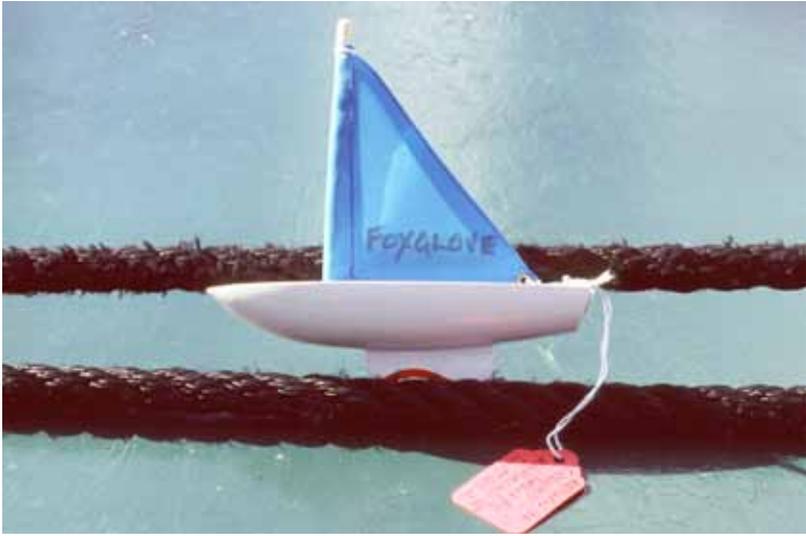
Log. Stay in Bowling.

### **Friday -Bathtime thoughts**

I remember when I was wee staring at the painting on my bedroom wall of the boys in the rowing boat.

### **Saturday- Haste ye back**

Onto the Clyde. Release Seam Foam, capsizes, but we manage to right her. Pour the Forth carried in a vodka bottle into the Clyde. Once round the harbour and then back for a dram.





Day2. Seven of us locked out of Peccadillo. No answer from Davy. Gerry finds a removable window. As the smallest, he asks me if I think I can get in the gap. On the canal side, with Gerry and Bryan holding, I try to worm in. Feet first I discover I need my hands to squeeze in my bum. Re-try head first. Breasts go through one by one. Some push/don't push confusion and the floor is looming too fast. Much shouting, but I'm in. Scraped and adrenalin fuelled. Doors opened, I reach for a dram.









55° 57' .87 N 04° 02' .65 W 03 04 10 20.30



58° 57' .12 N 03° 17' .39 W 07 04 10 06.10



## VOYAGE LOG

Emmanuelle is already aboard. We've travelled up together. It's been a road movie through Scotland. She is very keen to make the journey. There is another good option. The van, loaded with gear, needs to go back south. It looks like it's going to be fine, clear, cold winter light for a day or two. She could drive, slow-time, the great north coast of Scotland. She'd be likely to catch a glimpse of a brave little white yacht, out from Tongue or Eriboll or the other inlets along our sea-road.

That does appeal but she reasons that she wants to observe the passage from the innards of the ship. I've tried to describe how basic it all is. I think I've done it fairly. I've also tried to describe the difference between sailing in cold weather and in summer. Between surfing with the quartering wave driving you beyond your hull-speed – as on the way up this road- and thumping into large seas that slow even El Vigo.

Maybe I have a way of doing this which is dependent on knowing how I talk. I remember advising my younger son not to go off a high board in the Commonwealth Pool in Edinburgh. Of course he wants to do what his big brother has done. Especially when he's not there and the younger has a chance to shine. But the intermediate boards are closed. It's a big step up to the third highest one.

I outline the reasons why I don't think it's a good idea. I don't say, "No you can't do that." He does it and comes down on his back. The hard noise stuns everyone around. The attendant comes over quietly and tells me what must be done now. He must not get out of the pool yet. He must keep his back in the water. Then we have to go to the cold shower. He must keep the whole area under cold water for as long as he can stand. We do this. There is bad bruising but the pain becomes bearable.

We're now planning to leave Stromness, stemming a bit of tide to bump out into a strong westerly airstream when we're trying to sail to the west. The advantage of this departure time is a kick of a knot of tide for a considerable distance out. The disadvantage is that there will be about 6 hours of building water, from the strong breeze during the night. If the wind does indeed shift to the south, that will be fine. So we could find the best angle we can to take us down closer to the Scot-

tish mainland, around Tongue or even Loch Eriboll if we're very lucky, in the reasonable hope that the wind-shift will then give us a reach (right angle to the wind) to allow safe clearance of Cape Wrath.

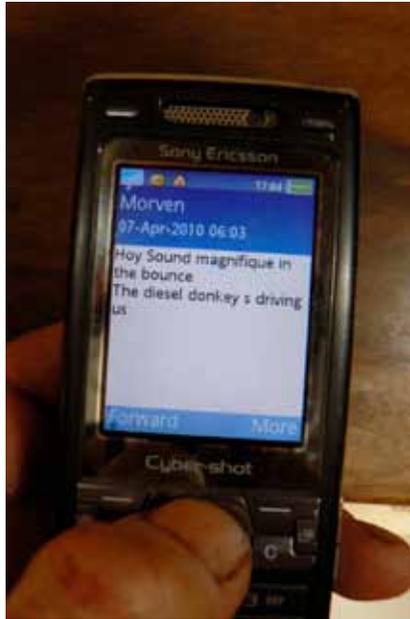
This is probably the point to say to Emmanuelle that it's going to be tougher than outlined. I think I do say this but there is also some euphoria in getting ready to throw off the warps. She wants the experience, even in the knowledge that she might be hopelessly seasick in a tight space for two days. I'm also trying not to think that we could have a keen diehard young sailor in the third bunk, who, willing and able to take a watch, would allow a little more sleep and warmth along the way for Sean and myself.

Emmanuelle is a very disciplined artist and has a range of skills and techniques at her disposal. She draws and uses language and teaches contemporary photography. I very much want to see what her keen eye will make of the experience.

The ferry arrives in time. Sean is on it and the dinner and a small glass or two of red wine goes down very well. Emmanuelle can talk easily with him and there's not much to discuss about the passage-planning. We only have the days we've got. But if the wind stays west there is the option of making for Ullapool. Sean could then meet up with his girlfriend and we'd just have to wait for a small shift to get across to Stornoway in an easy day.

We hear the wind rise steadily. It's nothing like a gale – just a bit of a bounce. Emmanuelle is now more used to the tight space we have to move – or not move – in. She's up soon after being issued with tea and out for the last use of a civilized toilet.





We leave at 05.15, just what I'd hoped for. We hold a running warp on the pontoon to hold the stern in and let the bow turn. Vigo will always thrust to starboard because of the off-centre engine. The tactic gets us clear with no fuss. There's a red and a green to get us out and I've some GPS waypoints and a couple of noted bearings as a back-up. But there's enough light in the sky already to make out the shapes of the hills of Hoy and Grimsey Light. We have to give the point to starboard a decent clearance. No short-cuts.

We have enough power to make slow but steady progress. Emmanuelle is fascinated by the movement and looks a little surprised as

Sean and myself are exchanging glances saying – so far so good. Not that much sea or chop. That was good advice, to leave on the last hour of the incoming water. And then as we leave the headlands on either side behind us, the waves are that bit larger. The boat is slower and the wind is stronger. We keep the engine running and the mainsail sheeted in hard.

Another reef, Sean?

I think so, Da. Will I go up?

No, you're all right. I'll do this one.

So Sean stays on the helm. Emmanuelle is still in the cockpit. I clip on and take some sail-ties with me.

There are many different methods of reducing sail. On most boats there is a sequence of set actions. You must first raise the boom that is fixed to the lower edge of the mainsail. To do this, the controlling rope – the sheet – must be free to travel. The tackle which holds the boom down low must be eased and a rope which goes from the back end of the boom and up the mast and down again – that's the topping lift –

has to be pulled. That raises the spar so the power falls out of the sail. It's then easier to raise or lower the sail which should glide in a track up the mast.

The actions go quite smoothly. I only have one winch on the mast. The others are under reconstruction in Stornoway. And there is another fixed under the boom. I know which parts work well and which don't. Again, it's not ideal but there's nothing critical or dangerous. I've done the deck-checks before leaving, a routine of checking the tension of the rigging and wiring or taping-up the bottle-screws which control the forces in the wires.

There are stainless steel eyes set in the sail at different levels so you can put less up high. The correct eye is hooked down at the boom and I re-tension the sail by putting the red halyard on the solo winch. Done. But Sean calls that it's off the hook. That happens sometimes when you don't have one person to hold and one to winch. I've also got funny fingers. The pinky on my left hand is now permanently bent to a right angle. In another 4 years it will be a claw like the one on my brother's hand. Then I'll get an operation to release it. You have to get used to each stage of that developing syndrome. I'm dropping a lot of crockery in the kitchen. I don't have the same appetite for working with my hands at jobs which need a good control of tools for detailed work. So I think I've just lost the eye from the hook before the tension has returned.

But I look at it and there's something strange. The eye is on the hook but everything is lifting. Too late, it's clear that the bolt which holds the heavy boom to the mast is lifting up and up. It jumps out as I think this out. Of course the shackle that keeps that bolt in place is the one I've missed when I've checked and wired up all the others. You don't check most of them. You check all of them. This is where a second pair of eyes is good. I should have sent Sean out with a torch before we ate last night. It's like proof-reading.

Sean holds her into the wind and the deck is leaping. The boom is held at the end by the light topping lift but there is shock-loading as this end charges about. If a wrist is in the way of that, it will be snapped. Sean is asking if we should swap. But I know exactly what has happened and it's difficult to explain details against the noise of wind. This is

not a gale, nowhere near it. But strong breeze sounds and feels much more as you're going into it.

I could improvise a rope to hold it down but that's not good enough for this passage. That boom has to go back to the fitting designed to take the forces. I use the tail of the halyard as a crane, looped round the boom and taken to a higher cleat on the mast. Inch by inch I raise it to the level where the eyes can be lined with the pin. That's four holes to line-up. It's so nearly there, again and again. I'm tapping with the heel of my hand. But one tap too much and it's out again. Again and again. I'm getting tired.

For some weeks I've been doing a few exercises to get ready for a season that will include a bit of rowing and maybe a little climbing. But it's not been serious training. It would make sense to ask the stronger Sean to take over now. But there is real risk of a broken wrist at this job. I'm the one who caused it by missing that shackle. I'm the one who has to fix it.

I could not tell you how long it took. But one time the holes were in line and the pin dropped. I stole a shackle from a place it was not needed now. This time I also put a cable-tie (a good thing to have in your pocket) on it right away. Once was enough for that wee job on any trip.

I had to sleep when I reached the cockpit. For ten minutes I just put my head back and I was down deep. I woke to Sean asking if I was okay and I could say, aye fine now. The boat was eased off the wind and the main and motor combined to take us on a realistic angle to the wind. We wouldn't clear Cape Wrath of course, on this one, but we'd be in a good position to reap the harvest when the wind shifted. By then we should be on a new cycle of tide and we'd get round the corner.

Emmanuelle retreated. She took to her bunk and that was that. Her gear fell to the floor but it wasn't really in the way. It wouldn't fall further than that. She asked for very little except a sip of water now and again. She had a bag to be sick in and a basin to catch the drips from above.

We settled to a routine of about an hour on and an hour off. For me it was the cold more than the fatigue. Sean shrugged at his Dad. I know

by now I should have layers of thermals and no jeans and the thick jerseys won't work tonight.

The engine stops. I pulled off the boards so I could shine a torch at the water-trap, visible at the first filter in the system. It was milky. I'd drained it and checked it and ran the donkey but any residue of water will get shaken when it's lumpy like this. If I'd checked it before and seen it at the filter, I could have drained off the water till the fuel ran clean again. But if the engine has stopped it's reached past the secondary filter and arrived at the injectors.

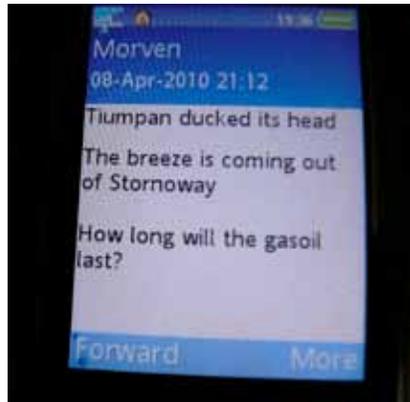
So I took out the spare from the chart table drawer and the 14 mill spanner for the bleed-screw and the chain-wrench to take the old one off. It does not take long. There's plenty juice in the battery now but I use the manual lift pump as far as possible to get the fuel running. I also use a trick taught to me by Martin, the Stornoway lifeboat engineer. I ask Sean to blow down the vent pipe of the plastic fuel-tank so it pressurizes. This fills the filters fast.

Of course it takes a few goes till all the air is out of the system. But the technique works well. Sean is impressed. You've done that pretty recently, Da? I have.

We needed the engine to achieve the angle and I begin to worry about the quantity of fuel aboard.

That's why we got a short period of good sailing that night. The wind had not noticeably shifted. The long beaches at Tongue looked spectacular before the dark hit. There was a shine on the waters and snow on the big ridges. Easier to steer on one of the snow capped tops than by lining up a number or a needle. But really we were steering on the wind – on what it was possible to achieve.

I knew we would have to conserve fuel. Now was the time to fall a few points off. Raise a foresail again and get her tramping. We'd need to keep her out away from the land now, until we achieved an angle that would bring us further along nearer Cape Wrath. There was no use in worrying about trying to achieve a five mile clearance now. We simply had to get the boat moving and tack as necessary, to make progress.



I'd also have to keep an eye on how far out we'd come in all the tacking. Nun Rock can be pretty well awash when there's a big swell on. There might be fleets of creels set around that one.

But on or off the wind, there is another issue of how much pressure you can put on your small ship. So now we have the no. 2 genoa, in quite heavy cloth and it's driving us very well, still

balanced against the reefed main. The wind is gusting about force 6 but is usually less. Our speed is up at last and the boat's driving well. But we'll meet larger seas soon and dark is coming. Neither of us wants to be the one to say it, but we should reef down. We could put another reef in the main or change foresails. Even Sean is getting tired. The foresail change is harder work. In the end we do both. But we go for the storm jib rather than the no. 3 foresail because it's just a lot less work.

The present wind strength doesn't merit that reduction but the sea conditions do. At night we don't want to think of a big wave filling our foresail with water-pressure. This is the upwind balance to a choice I made on the sail up to Orkney with a following wind. For much the same reasons we reduced sail at night to a level that slowed the boat quite a bit.

For a time we are only making 3 knots. It's hard to take after we've been bouncing along at 6.5. The bottom of the boat needs scrubbing and painting and I'm aware of how sluggish she is. Then again, we're in a cycle of tides with us and tide against us. It turns at different times as we progress along the north coast. We don't seem to be progressing far on this tack. But if we hold her till she's well out, we'll make good way next one, with the tide helping. But we should make the turn soon enough to have a few hours of assistance from the current.

I bump on the motor for a time. We're also running navigation lights all night and some other electrics too. We do have an electronic tiller-

pilot that should steer better than we can. But it's not so effective when the seas are complex like these ones. It's also very vulnerable when a wave breaks over us. That happens from time to time.

When I can afford it, I'd like to get a spray hood fitted on the boat to give us and the instruments some protection from the breaking water. It's very wet below now. It's common to have drips that occur along the line where the deck meets the cabin. It's no use putting gunge where you see the drips. That will only trap water and cause rot. I think I've done exactly the wrong thing. A few years ago I did some work with a friend who is very good with epoxy but is not trained in boat construction. He has built some excellent ply-epoxy boats. But I've been advised now that what we did, taping and filling over the bead from the deck to the cabin is only going to trap moisture. It already has. I'll need to remove all that. Fair off the deck and bed some shaped beading on a flexible base. There will always be some movement in these areas. There will always be a list of jobs to do.

So now that waves are breaking on the deck all the time, there is a steady series of drips. The sleeping bag still holds enough warmth if you get in it fast with most of your clothes on when you come off watch. I take the time to fill the kettle. I have the knack of pre-heating the pressurized paraffin cooker, with a blowtorch, so even when we're jumping, I can raise some heat. I fill a flask and fill the hot water bottle. Before the kettle boils, I find a perch on the chart table and put both bare feet on the kettle. I wake Emmanuelle and ask if she has any dry socks. I've used my whole stock.

I fill a second hot-water bottle for Emmanuelle and pour her a little hot water to drink. She is no trouble at all. I remember other trips and one person's prima donna take on being seasick.

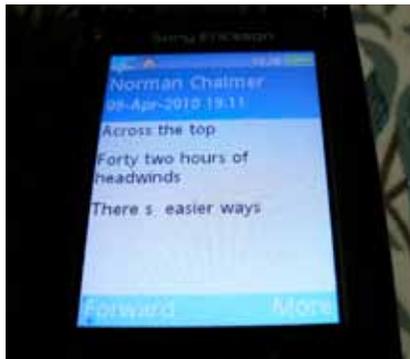
So the night passes and the next day too. We are still not well clear of Cape Wrath. We've covered a lot of miles, getting an angle that will cut into these seas and attempting to work tides and available wind without putting too much strain on the boat. Sometimes Sean or myself will take a longer turn at the tiller, as bright light gives some warmth and the sight of the mountains and the shapes of the waves give the interest that keep you alert. I have not bothered to charge up my own camera and have it ready. That's Emmanuelle's end of the

ship – as they say. So I borrow her camera and take a few shots. I see a video but don't take it. The upper row of ties holding a green spray-dodger has held but the lower ones are all pulled out. It pulses and breathes in response to the forces. And this is with moving water out from it and still mountains up in another strata of the frame.

From time to time we kick in the motor and it does help us gain some miles. It stops without being asked. I poke the torch at the filter again but it's clean this time. And then I realize that we've just used up the tank. I try the changeover to the heater's tank. But of course because it's run dry in a part of the system, I do have to bleed the air out. We're getting fluent at this, between us, and the engine is soon purring again. We've used the top-up two gallon tank already. That's it then.

We are tacking well out into the top area of the North Minch now, looking back to the north coast. We decide to get the best angle we can on the mainland and I reckon we might get close to Handa Island. Lochinver would not be too bad for Sean. I've been towed in there once already, due to fuel-system problems and fluky winds so I'm not keen on risking needing help again. But one tack out to clear the point of Stoer and we could make a fair course for Ullapool. The wind would take us right down the loch and we could pick up a mooring at the pier or further across in Logie Bay near our good friend Mark Stockl, the boatbuilder.

Not a terrible solution and it gives us hope. But when we assess progress we've got a hint of that wind shift at last and it looks like we could make Stornoway tonight. We both know it's going to be a late night but the worst option, unless the wind dies completely, is to arrive just in time for Sean to step on the morning ferry. We decide together



that we're going across. I'm sending some text messages from the boat, when we're close in and have a signal. I think of Gerry and Morven and their continuing passage along the canal. Sean lets Rosie know we're going for Stornoway and should be in by late tonight.

We have to concentrate well with the fickle breeze. By evening it's falling

very light. We have the genoa and the full main and we're struggling to make 4 knots.

This is the time to get another push. I want to keep some diesel for the arrival in the harbour but we might not get there tonight unless we burn a little right now.

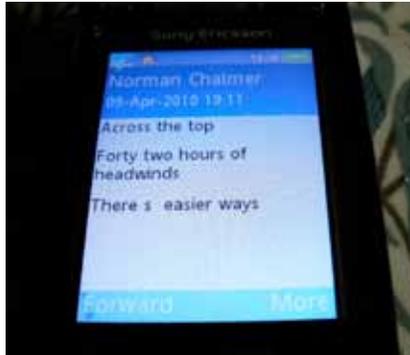
But I must have used more of the fuel in the heater than I'd thought because we ran that tank dry too.

It's almost a relief. We're lapping along and Sean has done the plot this time. We're slow but the course is good. The fine evening gives us some energy and I bring out an Orkney beer each instead of putting my head down. I put out some eats and Sean opens the bottles without an opener. We have a yarn, with the boat just purring slowly along towards home. It turns out we both have some more travel plans and we both want to be writers. There's a compulsion to see things to compare and to analyze them by discussion in a written form. Aye.

Emmanuelle surfaces when the boat is flat as we glide into the harbour. There's not much tide but we keep Vigo moving. The freight ferry is about to sail and a fishing boat is belting along behind us. Sean has put Emmanuelle on the tiller and is talking her through it while I dig out fenders and warps. We had a plan to sail round the corner into the inner harbour but we'll lose the light airs entirely at the end of the pier.

We're well over the harbour from the freight-ferry and I keep an eye for marks to make sure we're clear of the outlying reefs. Emmanuelle is enjoying herself but I have the touch of nerves any skipper has when he's to dodge boats and berth under sail in unreliable breeze. Yes, she says, she knows to put it right to go left and demonstrates when we need to make the turn but she turns the wrong way. I know to say quietly "No, your other left, dear." But I put on my skipper's voice and Sean gives me a dirty look which does the trick. I shut up and she gets the hang of it.

From then on we're a very good team. We take turn passing steering instructions and the woman who has been out of the game for some 39 hours, brings her alongside the mighty Elinca with no fuss. Sean



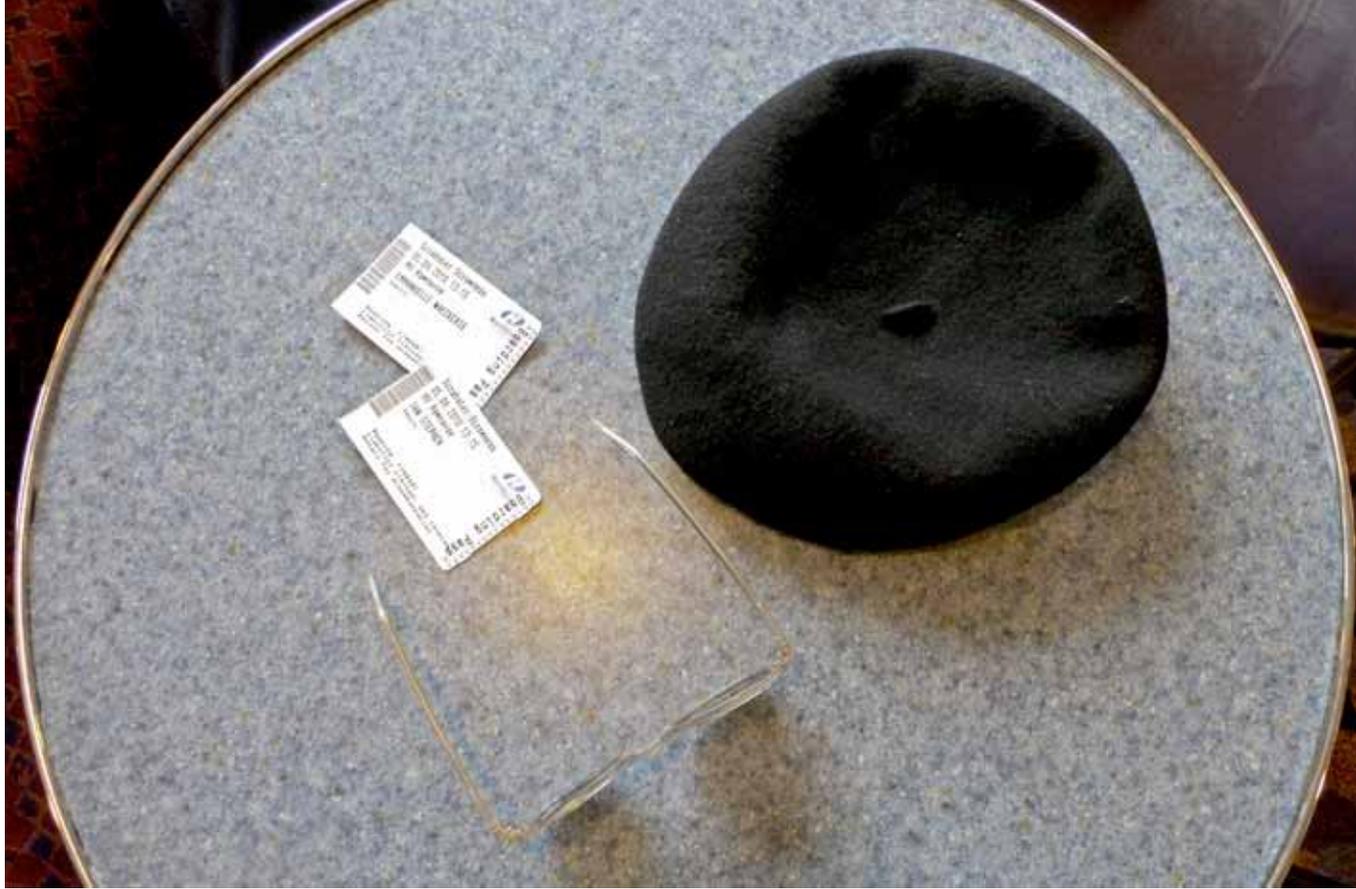
takes the bow rope and I brake with a stern spring, then bring her in.

Rosie is waiting for her man and says the dinner is on. My good friend Michael has heard we're homeward bound and come down to meet the boat. I say hi and realise we've eaten a lot less than we normally do at sea and I remember the hefty steaks we never quite got down us when the water was quieter. I fix the springs

and check the fenders and leave the rest of the sort-out till tomorrow.

There is fresh thyme growing in the kitchen windowsill and plenty garlic. I share some of my steak and potatoes with the woman who was going to rest her stomach for a little bit longer. I know that she'll be ravenous again soon. I also know that Sean and myself will fall into deep sleep soon but not for long. He lives in my old studio, with Rosie, for now. That makes me feel good.

It takes a few days to break the new circle of watch-keeping hours. That system works well for writing too.



our haste seek, my  
the flow of my tears  
in fear of Thee,  
the throbbing of my heart  
in dread of Thee,  
and the infirmity of my limbs  
in awe of Thee.

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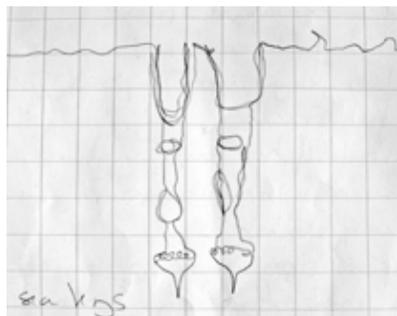


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## 5th April / Easter Monday

Arrived on Orkney at 3pm. First sight of El Vigo from the ferry, Hamnavoe, looking elegant yet tiny next to two metal fishing trawlers. The shock of her inner tightness is soon overcome once warmth and hot tea reached my stomach. Ian is in skipper mode, planning our journey ahead, worrying about a mysterious recurring inner leak, rejoicing at my quick adaptation, both wondering how fast my sea legs will come on.

Liver stew on the slow cooker, a bottle of Merlot, even a bit of knitting before settling for a rough night on my narrow berth, bucket at my feet just in case. The hot water bottle against my belly has gone cold by the time heavy gales outside woke me up keeping me listening for a long while, skipper slept through it all. It was pointed to me that technically it was only a big breeze.



## 6th April / Swinging Tuesday

I am fine on board, not sick, porridge breakfast followed by crew chores under skipper's orders.

Shopping, storing, attaching spray guards, learning one or two knots, replacing gaz canister for fog horn is the excuse to get me out of the way.

Dry land swaying under my feet from one ear to the other, as is the cappuccino cup in my hand and the pen with which I am writing these moving words. Le langage de la langue, swaying of language in my brain and on paper. Getting used to the Spartan tightness of El Vigo.

"Is she tight now?" Willie asked referring to her leakage from down below. "Not quite, not quite," skipper answers. I am a she on board a not so tight other she ready for the sea.

A swim in chlorine water and a welcomed hot shower before the arrival of prodigal son Sean for a reunion voyage to sail her, not me, home. Head wind all the way according to forecast, tough journey ahead but she and I are in the best possible hands of skipper and son.

Dinner on board, Rioja and a wee dram, early night. 4.30 call for a 5.20 start in tune with the last of the incoming tide.

## 7th April / Puking Wednesday

5.25 am pitch black leaving Stromness with engine on, three of us on deck, fully kitted for arctic conditions, my oilies courtesy of Norman Chalmers of Edinburgh, headwind as expected. The end of the incoming tide make for a very choppy sea, huge swells with white crests, my stomach is holding, my attention diverted by the spectacular scenery and the novelty of the experience, this is my first sailing. Sunrise over Stromness brings clear blue sky and chilly wind.



Panic when the boom came loose while raising the main sail, the shackle hadn't been moused securely and came off at the first jolt, concern and stress in Sean's eyes watching Da struggling with the weight of it all in choppy sea, risk of serious injury, crashing of bones, losing the beam. Skipper struggled for a long while, we were watching intently in silence, relief all around when he hooked it back onto the mast leaving him heart pounding and short breathed for a while after.

7.20am Glorious French puke in the breeze, no warning, just a quick twist of the guts and a great sense of release, then two less pleasurable ones, feeling weak at the knees, head spinning.

First attempt to go down below unsuccessful, diesel fumes brought another burst of bile from the bottom of my guts, just managing to reach the sea starboard, banging hard in the process my lower back against something even harder, sharp pain. I am cold, shivering all over, teeth shattering. Second attempt to reach the tight down below, mouth and jaws clenched, feet trying to pre-empt the bumpy moves of Vigo negotiating the waves. Success.

Finally lying down on my berth, held tight by the lee cloth, sort of hammock stopping you from falling off in rough weather, making a

cocoon-like structure in which I can retreat horizontally, eyes closed the only way not to feel nauseous despite the diesel fumes and darkness away from the sea breeze. Underneath two wet sleeping bags, shivering, rocked in all directions. I wait not knowing yet that I would remain there for the rest of the day and night and following day, oblivious to time, giving in, shutting off all I could. I learned to do so a few years ago when fighting inner pirates with heavy duty chemical warfare, drifting in and out of delirious sleep, trying unsuccessfully now and again to stand up and reach the open air only a few narrow and shaky feet away, fresh air, sun light, the West coast of Scotland more appealing than this tight and dump bunk below sea level.

Besides, one needs a goal. My sole distraction is watching the great team work of skipper and son, battling against the wind with a moody engine demanding regular attention, minimal verbal interaction, no need, taking hourly turns for warmth, hot food and quick nap. I am amazed at their stamina and ease of movement in and around what felt like being in a tumble drier dragged down a bumpy road. They actually seemed to be enjoying it, I know they were.

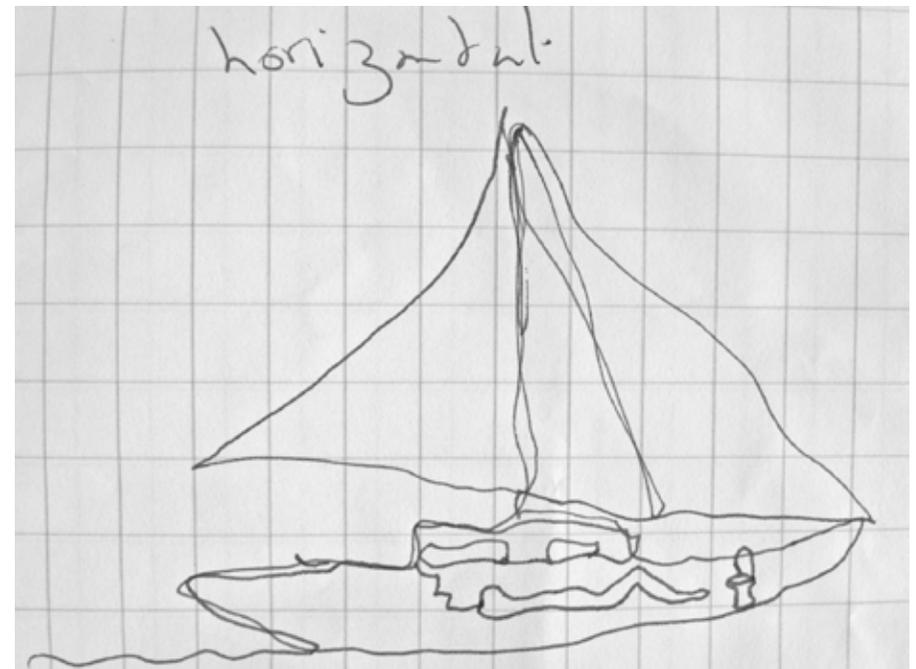
What should have been a twenty-four hours rough ride might easily take twice as much, donkey trouble, persistent strong headwind and Cape Wrath wrath mightier than expected. I am keeping watch sleeping in tune with the one resting, occasionally asking for a drop of water, trying not to make a fuss, they have enough to deal with.

No more puking yet no success at standing or even sitting up, I am in desperate need of the toilet only two steps away at the bottom of my bunk. Yet it feels as unreachable as the moon or our destination and the combination of three valves and a pump to make it work way too complicated for my fuzzy mind plus the thought that I might sink the boat if I do not do it in the right sequence. I haven't felt that weak and hopeless since my fight against inner pirates.

Yet I am not panicking, actually enjoying revisiting the psychological mindset it has brought me back too; a sort of inner expansion in a shrunk to a minimum outerspace. I am hoping the morning will bring calmer waters, good wind and Stornoway in sight despite echoes of exchanges between skipper and son hinting at the opposite.

## 8th April / Horizontal Thursday

Glimmer of sunrise through the small window above my berth, empty stomach, fuzzy mind, sore lower back, wet bunk, empty bucket, good spirit; my body has adapted to narrow confined bunk and the never ending bouncing of Vigo, head winds still with us yet glorious sky. I am trying to imagine the west coast of Scotland we are sailing along after passing Cape Wrath, my only view a swinging towel and paraffin lamp. Task of the day, reaching the toilet without breaking any bones or throwing up or relieving myself before time, mission accomplished around 3pm, great sense of achievement, body more at ease, mind free to wander and let go, following every bounce on the water, all possible combination of left right up down and side way, trying to find patterns, drawing it in my mind, with my body, counting how long it has been without food or water or being vertical, one unsuspected puke, violent and bitter taste, wondering how much longer. I am hearing words of having to stop for the night in Ullapool trying not to believe it, willing for it not to happen. Thinking of all the refugees who have it much worse than me crossing the Med in search of a better



life escaping their fate in Africa being exploited and badly treated by their peers, in even worse condition than their enslaved ancestors crossing the Atlantic. Sean and Ian are exhausted yet show no signs of impatience or stress. I am so impressed.

The paraffin stove has given up, no more hot food; the engine keeps on stopping, each time Ian has to pump it dry and restart it. I have to give him my oilies and spare jumpers, socks and hat, all his stuff is wet, he has no way of warming himself up, the stove having died, image of his feet against a pan of chilli con carne being heated up for their dinner last night. Even if I was able to I cannot get on deck now as I have no more clothes, half relief, half feeling of being trapped down below.

My mind is clearing, attempt at taking photographs through the tiny window above my berth, but I am starboard and the coast line is on the other side. I decide to draw it blind instead, letting the movement of Vigo drag the pen on the paper propped against my moving knees; the 2 actions independent of each other creating what looks like a horizon of superimposed and chaotic swells, inner satisfaction at the conceptual edge of my desperate gesture and the irony of my situation; sailing on a beautiful racing wooden yacht along some spectacular landscape yet being unable to enjoy it, lying below sea level in her dark womb. My left hand is now drawing for my eyes the contour of the outer sea. Before sunset skipper decided to cross the Minch and attempt to reach Stornoway, I am relieved, inner smile. The engine seems to hold, the sea is calmer, the wind has died down. On the radio the occasional voice of the Stornoway coastguard answering calls, the end feels nigh. Yet hours pass slowly, in and out of sleep, my mind and body progressively feeling stronger. 10.30 pm the first urge to stand up since we started 38 hours ago, tentatively, sitting upright head and guts feeling steady, staying put for a bit.

Then hooray, I am reaching vertical position and the open air in a few seconds joining skipper and son who are sharing a beer on deck, enjoying a rare moment together, relaxing after a tough crossing, one of the toughest actually according to Ian. I am feeling doubly proud in surviving it almost gracefully. Perfect timing, Stornoway harbour is in the distance, donkey has run out of diesel, we are sailing in very slowly, hardly any wind, it is not allowed to go in without an engine

but we do it anyway, Ian has spent 20 years as a coastguard here, he knows what he is doing. I am enjoying the calm of it all, spaced out, weak for lack of food yet happy and feeling somehow fulfilled. I am asked to steer the boat to its mooring against a big expensive yacht, risks of bumping into it and causing damage, but Ian and Sean have to operate the sails as we have no engine. I am following instructions, mistakes left for right once or twice, anxious yet calm on the surface. It is 11.30pm two people are waiting for us on docks, watching the operation, checking me out. Smooth parking, I get thumbs up from all, I did great apparently, they find it hard to believe it is my first time sailing, steering, mooring a boat. I think they are having me on, 38 hours horizontal on a 42 hours journey; I don't call that great sailing. People here tell me this trip is one of the hardest to do for any experienced sailor, few have done it, many dream of doing it, I did it. I made it.

Storness to Stornoway, 42 hours, headwind all the way and a grumpy donkey, not one moan.



