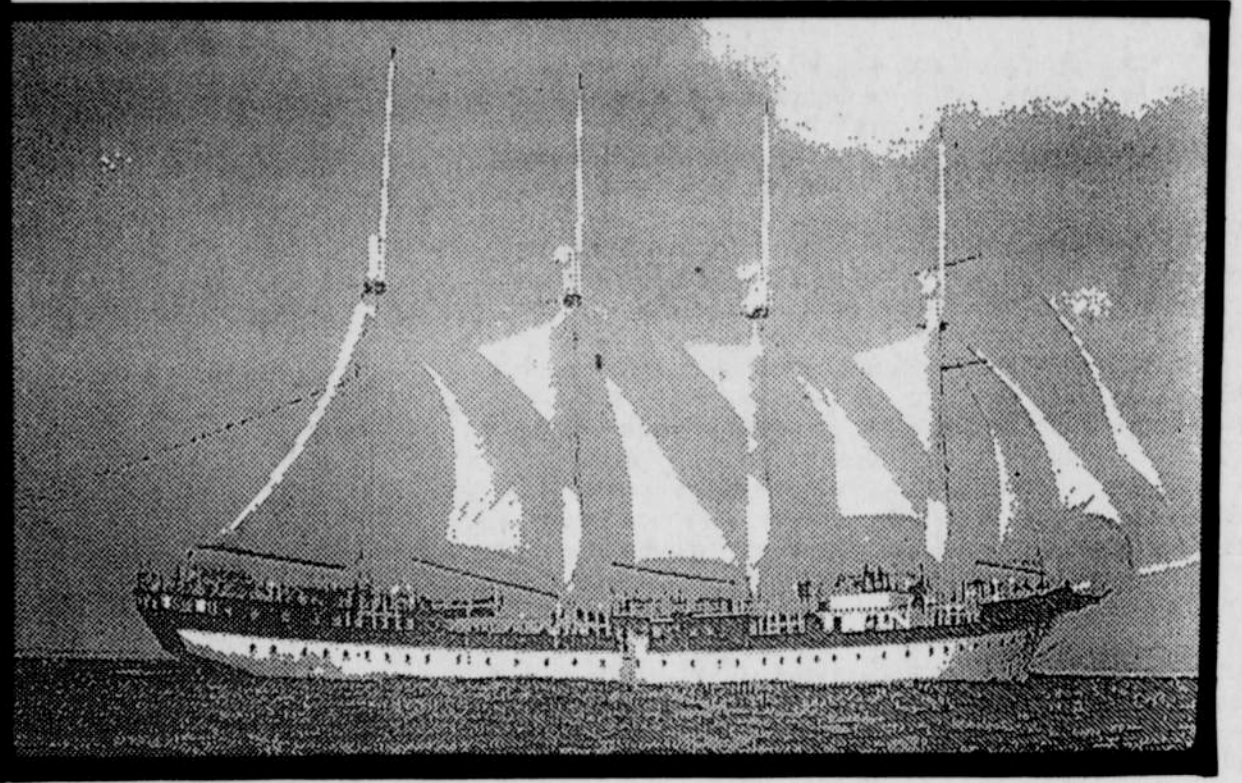




# THE SPASTIC & THE SEA



FANTOME, 1974 (PHOTO BY MPMC)

BY ARTHUR HONEYMAN

Among the many thousands of casualties of Hurricane Mitch last October was the four-masted staysail schooner *Fantome*, which disappeared with its crew of 31 after dropping off passengers in Mexico. *Fantome* had been owned by Windjammer Cruises and operated in the Caribbean. It was built in 1927 for the Duke of Westminster in Germany, which constructed the world's best large windships in the years between the World Wars (most of the sailing training ships still in use, including the U.S. Coast Guard's *Eagle*, were built at the time), it had served as a training ship for the Italian Navy and was purchased in the 1950s by the Greek shipping tycoon Aristotle Onassis as a wedding present for Prince Ranier and Princess Grace (Kelly) of Monaco, but was never delivered because he wasn't invited to the wedding.

*Fantome* was on a cruise near Belize and the Bay Islands when it disappeared after disembarking its passengers. The ship sought to escape the hurricane by heading for a nearby island but Hurricane Mitch changed course and *Fantome* was caught. The last communication from *Fantome's* crew was that the ship was experiencing 100-knot winds and 40-degree rolls. Coast Guard aircraft, assisted by the British Navy's *HMS Sheffield*, searched for more than a week for *Fantome* but all that was found were an empty life raft and several life-jackets.

Portland writer and poet Arthur Honeyman sailed on a cruise in the Bahamas aboard *Fantome* in the spring of 1974. He wrote an account of his adventure and incorporated it into the following essay.

Wilderness is drama, and the reverse. As soon as you forget this, wilderness is no longer wilderness, rather it is drudgery. And to be on the rolling deck of a schooner in the middle of the ocean is as much of a wilderness as the mosquito ridden slopes of the Sierra Nevada or the Cascades; a rolling deck is a floating isle tossed about by a fluid maze, far less secure and far more dramatic than hard ground.

To be a Spastic, either on a rolling deck or crawling, shaking and struggling into a bathtub filled with tepid water, is to have created your own internal wilderness, because you are without control and eventually aware of your own frailty; for instance you need to rise up from the bathtub still alive. However, to be a Spastic in a bathtub, chaos reigning, splashing the floor uncontrollably, is still a lot better than no bath at all. And besides, you have time to reflect while your body screams to shake loose and everyone else screams to stop shaking, and you are trying to rise up to a rolling deck, but your body is almost ready to subside into a primeval gulch alone with the rest of the amoebas.

Even drinking is not easy. Water slobbers down my beard and throat. I gag and choke, and this too becomes a spitting, sputtering wilderness.

The roar of the ocean is equivalent to the whispering of trees. There are times when only the Spastic can interrupt the tranquillity and the ring of silence. No wonder the Indians left spastics to die. Imagine a shaky brave quivering on the stalk of some prey, not disturbing himself but disturbing everyone else, most of all the ring of silence (a naturally understood law) before loosing his shaft on the would-be victim. Nonetheless, in today's decadent society a Spastic shook his way into new worlds on a rolling deck and probably disturbed civilization, creating natural and social chaos in a normally sane region of the sphere. History was disturbed (Poseidon shook in his watery grave wrinkling the mirror of Narcissus and Ishmael) and so was pre-history. The Spastic saw:

"Rolling along the street, I let my eyes wander from the street to the beach to the sea. Everything on land seemed to be colored white (white is a color in the Caribbean Sea) and then began a bright aqua green, clear down to the bottom, and gradated into bright blue, also clear down to the bottom, and the gradation suddenly shaded into blue-purple and the blue-purple became purple-red. And then my eyes rested on the four-masted staysail schooner which was our ship. My mind was on the Spanish Main. The sky was blue, the sea was blue and everything else was bleached white, except for the black laborers, picks in hand. I urged my friend Michael McCusker to move us closer to the edge of the water. We found ourselves beside a Union Gospel Church. The white minister was busily overseeing the laborers. The world stopped. Work stopped. Picks hung in the air. Blacks gaped. The colors took on a Van Gogh madness. Blue, white, glare, Negro, clergy-black, merged and diffused like a bolt in my mind. I wish I could describe the look of awe on the Negroes' faces, the look of shock on the minister's. The scene was so eerie, that I asked Michael to push me away from there. We rolled away, leaving the faces still gaping. We stopped some more traffic that day: cars actually stopped and people stared. But down at the market, where the butcher was chopping up a fish, and a big turtle was waiting to get its head lopped off, a 12 year old boy asked Michael what was wrong with his 'brother'. Michael explained to the black boy about Cerebral Palsy. The boy tried to give him four Bahamian quarters. Michael explained to him that I was too proud to take money. The boy understood and I said something caustic about decadent American Spastic imperialists."

A Spastic saw and felt the sea merge into his being: Michael will tell how I almost tipped the lifeboat over in frustration, obnoxiously shaking and rocking it. Frequently, we used the lifeboat to get ashore. I would climb into the lifeboat when the crew lowered it from the davits to the deck to pick up other passengers, and then they would lower it the rest of the way into the ocean.

I would always take the first boat ride ashore and the last boat ride out to the ship. And one day I had to jump from the lifeboat into the sea and wade ashore. Naturally, Michael assisted me. That was the same day I swam in the Caribbean and for the first time in my life floated in a lifejacket. I let my mind relax and travel back through eons. I became a sea creature for a moment and I could feel the rhythm of the waves beating inside me.

But back in Boston Harbor in the early '60s, a Spastic rolled in a storm, riding a small outboard motorboat. The Spastic's usual lack of security and sense of chaos was confirmed, while the waves washed over the gunnels and the small craft was tossed against direction, and the sky was swirling in gray. Across the bay a streak of light bolted and struck a house. A puff of smoke grayed that part of the sky even more, a flickering orange leapt up to join the puff and to change the color of the sky. The Spastic's blood raced beyond fear, beyond terror, beyond disgust at the death of the people in the house, into a feeling of unfeeling ecstasy. He knew, like lightning, the certainty and searing of chaos. His Spastic life had trained him for this moment. Even though he clutched the gunnels for life, he reveled in the sinuous grasp for eternal breath. He had always known the futility of desiring for eternal breath, but at this moment that was what he was gasping for.

On the 'Fantome':

"One day the sea rolled like a real ocean rolls. It was the perfect day for sailing. I saw the sails go up. I saw Michael leap into action just like he's always talking about. I saw him and Bob and Joe Perkins and another Bob and Mark, jump on ropes and let the inertia from the weight of their fly-like bodies haul the sails all the way to the top of the mast. I then knew why steam had replaced sails. Steam was a laborsaving device and the beauty of sails had to be sacrificed along with the sailors. I, too, played my own heroic part. When I was a boy my dad taught me to move out from other people's feet when they were working. I was asleep in my sleeping bag and suddenly I heard a thundering bunch of feet on the deck. Without thinking I rolled my sleeping bag beneath a table and covered there heroically. "Dive for the bushes," I heard my dad's voice ringing in my mind. Soon Michael came and got me and sat me on a bench while I gazed at the dark blue sea rolling real waves. The waves were not big but the sea was not glass anymore. In a while a school of porpoises came and sported for us. Michael was on the bow and I was on the sundeck thinking magical thoughts about the playful sea."

And there were the times on the Nehalem River, when the water was down, the Spastic shook his clothes off and sat on a rocky ledge — midstream — and let the water tingle and trickle between his thighs and over his groin. Everything in his body crystallized and almost cracked, not just from the cold, but also from the knowledge that he was closer to nature than usual. But this was not a tranquil nature. His rump was rock raw and his legs were lengthened and lifted up out of proportion and beyond balance, while he was slapping mosquitoes away from his unreachable back. His friends didn't know the Spastic's chaos, even though he was, at the moment, a contortionist, grunting and squealing like a black fly-sucked pig. This was water in the wilderness.

Not long after the Caribbean cruise, on the coast of California a Spastic realized his conflict between chaos and tranquillity in verse:

There is a fine line between tranquillity and rage  
Rage is a rest from tranquillity, rage is life  
Tranquillity is sickness, death unrelated to death  
My bronze Indian woman directed an orchestra between earth and sea  
Poseidon responded to my wife's commands  
And Zephyr was her breath  
And I, a Spastic, leapt from my wheelchair  
Onto her prone nobility in a musical dance

Wilderness is the recognition that nature and chaos control you, and you sometimes desperately long for the roar of the ocean, the whispering of the trees, the shriek of silence, in a Spastic non-Spastic convulsion.

Arthur Honeyman was born with cerebral palsy. He is author of *Sam & His Cart* (illustrated by Michael DeWaide of Astoria), which was made into an award winning movie. Other books include *Sam & His Bright Idea* (also illustrated by DeWaide), *Claws & Horns* (illustrated by Don Osborne of Manzanita), *The Business of America: Economic Opinion of a Non-Expert*, *Domicile* (illustrated by JoAnn Honeyman), *The Follies of Sexism in the Civilized World*, and collections of his poetry, *Coffee Me A Cup of Fix*, *Epic*, *The Spastic & The Queen of America*, *Vernal Verse* and *Portraits in Poetry*. He has also published, through Wheel Press, which was co-owned by him and his wife JoAnn, a selection of his essays, *Journey* and *Journey II*. He lives and writes in Portland.



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