

This Control

The sailor pulls on three lines in succession, adjusting the boom vang, readying the halyards, before returning to the tiller. His name is Robert—Bob—and his face is permanently tanned from years of tours on navy aircraft carriers during the Vietnam War, and from the farm work he retired to afterwards. He appears fifty, but will let you know that he is almost seventy. “Hey, kiddo!” is one of his favorite phrases, followed by a slap on the back that leaves a mark.

Bob is the skipper of *Slingshot*, a twenty foot racing boat that he purchased after selling a thirty-three foot cruising sailboat. *Slingshot* is designed for performance, with smooth lines, light construction, and uncomfortable seats. The hull is painted white with blue lettering, and the waves that manage to splash onto the shallow deck wash out through the open stern. Bob isn't racing, but he's still hoping for the “strong breeze” that the boat is designed for.

“Wind looks good,” he says. “Let's raise the sails.”

After wrapping the halyards around winches, he hoists the main, a massive white triangle that stands out against the grey sky. It looks clean, crisp, and the red and blue letters on it match Bob's waterproof coveralls and jacket—a must have for ocean sailing.

Bob returns to the tiller after tying off the main halyard and kills the ten horsepower motor that he uses for entering and exiting port. A silence enters—a silence that had been forgotten during the twenty minutes spent listening to the drone of the motor. I can hear the waves splash against the boat, can hear the metal cables clang against the mast. Bob steers the boat off of the wind, allowing the sail to fill, and the boat takes off like a bullet, traveling faster than when under motor power. The silence is quickly replaced by the whistle of wind traveling around the sail and the pounding of the waves against the hull. Bob unfurls the jib. It is wrapped around a cable that runs from the bow to the top of the mast. When he pulls on a red line, the sail unrolls, looking as if it materializes out of nothing, conjured into existence.

It is early spring, and the grey sky casts an almost surreal tint on the islands in the Puget Sound. The deep green of grass and evergreens looks imagined, as if it could never be held. The tan bluffs look ready to crumble into nothing with the slightest touch. Even the lighthouses look straight out of a maritime painting. And yet they all exist there, real, tangible, holding out against the harsh, salty winds that threaten to tear away at the landscape. Grey waves transform into white foam as they crash against the cliffs. *Slingshot* catapults by all of this, a white speck bobbing over the deep grey.

Sailboats fly. At least, the sails and dagger board—keel—act like wings, generating lift. As the sails are blown in one direction, the dagger board pulls the other, creating propulsion. A very complex system of equations based on Newtonian physics can explain this. $F_w = -\{F_k + F_d\}$ describes velocity in relation to the angle of wind; $v = 1.34 \sqrt{\lambda}$ explains wave resistance in proportion to hull velocity. Most sailors, Bob says, can't tell you what these equations are.

“You get a feel for it. I see where the wind is, and adjust to it.”

The simple explanation: the wind tries to knock the boat over, while the dagger board prevents this from happening. The force needs to be released somehow: forward momentum is generated. Weather submits to the sailor.

Bob sways with the boat, keeping in rhythm with the rocking of the ocean. He leans back as *Slingshot* climbs over a wave; when the boat slides down a wave Bob shifts forward.

“We’re on a beam reach,” he explains. “The wind’s hitting our side—it’s the fastest way to sail without a spinnaker.”

While saying this, Bob is looking across the ocean at the shape of the waves, making minor changes to sail shape and boat direction, guiding *Slingshot* into “the zone,” the best possible trim to sail in this weather.

“It’s not really coming from the side, though,” he says. “It just looks like that. We change the wind when we sail. That’s just the apparent wind, not true wind.”

As I watch Bob, I begin to see a connection between his movements and the boat’s performance. Every adjustment is calculated to exploit the weather to serve a specific purpose. As the wind picks up, Bob tightens the boom vang, stretching the sail, presenting a flatter surface that allows for a tighter angle of attack. When the boat lists too far to port, he releases the sail, dumping the power, keeping *Slingshot* upright.

He controls nature with rope; wind submits to canvas sail. Each wave that washes over the deck drains out the stern and returns to the ocean, quickly forgotten. “Hardening up,” turning more into the wind, Bob forces *Slingshot* forward, propelled by wind that would otherwise toss the boat against the rocky shore. The boat lists even further to leeward, the dagger board struggling to keep *Slingshot* from capsizing. Bob holds all control—expose too much sail to the wind, and we’re lost; not enough, and we make no progress.

“Now we’re sailing!” Bob yells. I can barely hear his voice over the wind. He is leaning out over the water, his weight helping keep the boat more level. The knot meter, a small electronic panel on the mast that reads off boat speed, wind speed, direction and time, shows nine knots. That’s ten miles per hour sailing against the wind. The tiller pulls against Bob. If he lets go, the boat will turn into the wind, stopping the boat, leaving us tossed among the grey waves.

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Sailboats are loud. Cables twang, pulleys creak, sails luff and “whoomp”, the mast groans. Bob describes a race in the Columbia River Basin a number of years ago. Confined to a narrow gorge, the high winds that funneled in would change unexpectedly, sometimes switching direction 180 degrees, slamming into first one side of the boat and then the other. He and his crew were on a narrow reach, struggling to stay on course when Bob heard a loud crack, audible over the scream of the wind, and then saw the mast plummeting toward the deck under hundreds of pounds of pressure.

“We just dropped out of the race,” he says. “Had to get a new mast.”

I ask him if he was hit by the mast, and he says, “No, I’m still here.”

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Porpoises are swimming alongside *Slingshot*, jumping through its wake. They swim ahead of the boat and then fall behind again. There are six of them and it is difficult to see their grey bodies in the water. Occasionally, one will shoot a mixture of air and water out of its blowhole with a loud breathing sound. Two or three on the port side dive under the water and resurface off to starboard, close enough to touch. Bob changes course, and the porpoises follow for a few minutes before swimming away. I lose sight of them after a few seconds.

“Ready to raise the spinnaker?” Bob asks, steering *Slingshot* away from the direction of the wind. “Grab the blue line.”

I pick up a blue rope that runs from the cockpit up to the bow.

“No, the *blue* line,” Bob says.

I drop the first rope and pick up one that is white with a blue strand woven into it. I pull thirty feet of this rope into the cockpit, raising the giant sail. It is very difficult to raise, and my hands are raw afterwards. Bob, wearing gloves, adjusts two separate lines that stretch the sail open and it fills with air. *Slingshot* lurches forward.

The spinnaker is larger than the other sails, and is more colorful. It is blue and red on a white background and is shaped like a beetle's wing. It is used for sailing downwind, with the wind hitting the boat a little off to the side of the stern. It is suspended in front of the boat, pulling us behind it.

"You have to fly it," Bob says. "Like a parachute." He pulls first one line, then another, maintaining constant pressure on the sail so that it does not lose shape and become tangled. If it falls into the water it could pull the boat over.

The knot meter reads thirteen knots. That's fifteen miles per hour. As *Slingshot* gathers speed, it rises slightly out of the water, gliding on top. The hull begins to vibrate slightly, and an audible hum emanates from the vessel. We surf over waves, and the boat vibrates and hums more violently, like an animal waking from a deep sleep. Bob continues to adjust the spinnaker's lines, ensuring that the sail remains full as the wind shifts.

I walk up to the bow—Bob's suggestion—where I can watch as the prow slides over the waves. With the spinnaker pulling *Slingshot* out and on top of the water, the boat causes little disturbance, and looks as if it is ready to leap into the air. It is very quiet sailing with the wind, and I can hear seagulls sitting on a neon green buoy a little off to port as they call to each other, their grey and white bodies barely discernable against the grey clouds.

When I return to the cockpit I slip on a small puddle of water, and cut my hand on one of the blocks—pulleys—that are arranged on deck.

"Blood on the boat!" Bob shouts, chuckling, pointing at a few drops of red on the white fiberglass deck. "Don't worry, kiddo, it has to happen sometime."

Bob pokes at my chest. A wave soon washes over the deck, carrying the blood off into the grey ocean.

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The Egyptians were the first to operate sailboats, some 5,000 years ago. They would float north on the Nile's current, then sail back south against the river's flow. Ships no longer required thousands of slaves to row against the current. Since then, sailboats have become increasingly more effective at manipulating the weather. *Slingshot* is built for racing and is low to the water, uncomfortable, and exposed. It can be sailed single-handedly, or with up to four passengers.

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The sailboat is holding at thirteen knots, and continues to hum audibly. At this speed, we outrace the waves that are traveling in the same direction. After cresting each four-foot wave, the boat sinks into the valley between waves. From this valley, the boat looks feeble, as if the waves that rise on either end might crash over it, smother it, pull it under. But then *Slingshot* mounts another wave, smooth grey hills so easily cut through.

Bob sits at the stern, silent, watching the spinnaker. He has a grip strong enough to break your hand, but he holds the tiller lightly, changing direction only when the sail needs filling, as if allowing the boat to decide the best course.

I look again through the grey sky at the green islands, and hear Bob say, "Pretty, isn't it." It's not a question so much as a statement.

The sound of something hitting the deck draws Bob's attention back to the boat, where the knot meter has fallen from its fitting on the mast and is sliding around the cockpit.

"Take this," Bob says, handing me the tiller. Holding it, I can feel the water as it passes around the rudder. It feels elastic, and as I shift course the rudder attempts to jump back to its original position. Bob picks up the knot meter and searches inside the small cabin. He returns a minute later with a roll of black tape, which he uses to secure the device to the mast.

"We do what we have to," he says, laughing and tossing the tape back into the cabin.

He returns to his seat at the tiller, adjusting his rain jacket, pulling the collar up over his face. With his mouth covered, the lines around Bob's eyes stand out, lines formed from years of squinting at the horizon. The red and blue of his jacket contrasts the dull green of the islands visible behind him.

This is what he has to do. Sitting on *Slingshot*, the boat is its own island, and we are its temporary inhabitants. From the shore, we look little more than a speck on the ocean, but this does not matter.

The wind blows salt water over Bob's jacket. He adjusts the sails, keeping them filled, keeping *Slingshot* afloat as it shoots over the waves. Unseen, the dagger board cuts through the water, leaving small ripples in its wake. One miscalculation, one wrong adjustment, and nature takes over.