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US\$14 · C\$15



CATAMARAN



ART

LITERATURE

BRETT TAYLOR

Woman in Red Dress, 1970
Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 52 in.



BRETT TAYLOR

Icarus, 1967

Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48 in.



COURTESY HOLLIS TAGGART GALLERY, NEW YORK

WYNN PARKS

Voyage of the *Corinne*

At sea with the
artist Brett Taylor

Two months after Brett died in a Boston hospital, Gail and I are laboriously paddling out onto the Aegean. It's a hot day, a day for sunglasses. The paunchy inflatable in which we kneel needs bailing. Brett has named the little life raft after Picasso's grand painting *Guernica*. In better times, *Guernica* has served as dinghy for Brett's sailboat, *Corinne*. One of *Guernica*'s folding oars is broken, and by the time we're out far enough, trying to keep on course in a cross breeze has us both in a sweat. Finally, we ship oars and break open the box containing Brett's ashes.

"How do you want to do this?" I ask my widowed friend.

In answer, she digs her hand into the box, lets the ashes and tiny bone fragments sift slowly through her fingers into the azure water. My thoughts are hollow, empty of feeling. I look away, pretending not to see her tears.

"Help me," she whispers, after the third handful. I hesitate at the thought of putting my hand in. "Help me!" she says.

They feel like coarse sand, the ashes. I funnel them through my hand back into the box and see they are faintly violet in the intense Greek sunlight. They lead my thoughts back . . .

Brett Taylor and I had begun our acquaintance at sword-point. When I first came to teach at his Aegean School of Fine Arts, in 1974, Brett was thirty-one, a year younger than I. We were a couple of hotshot, creative types, still pumped up by university courses on the lives of great artists. He thought me precocious. I found his "art Brahmin" airs insufferable.

For nearly a year, in school and out, we challenged each other's every assumption, from personal style to T. S. Eliot. In the course of a long, insular winter, I'd brought back fencing gear from a trip from Athens. Our master-at-arms was a thin black-and-yellow book on fencing, points of which we debated vehemently in the course of self-instruction. Twice a week, we donned masks, took up sabers, and touché'd angry red welts on each other's arms and legs through all our jeans and gloves and woolen sweaters.

In truth, the competitiveness never went out of our rapprochement, but in July of 1975, one of those things that forge enduring bonds happened. We're walking down the school steps one afternoon, when Brett announces, "I saw this tight little seventeen-footer for sale when I went to Athens last week . . . if I can scrounge the money."

We hope for smooth sailing but know how in July, the Meltimi can reach gale force for days.

“Are we talking rowboats, or tall women?” I wisecrack back.

Brett tells me he’s gonna buy the little sloop rig and adds sailing to the school’s curriculum. “Get a big tax break.”

“You need a ‘big tax break’? How about doubling my stipend? Anyway: seventeen feet?” I say. “What is it, an inflatable with a plastic sail? You gotta have at least thirty feet if you wanna go anywhere.”

Brett frowns when not being taken seriously. “What are you talking about? This is a good little boat. You could sail around the world in this boat. Transports easy too; got its own trailer, even. I roll it on the ferry in Athens, and roll it off here . . .”

“So much for circumnavigation.” I snort.

* * *

A day later, it’s growing dark. Brett catches me in the school courtyard. “Come on,” he says. “There’s something I want to show you.”

He leads me to the small boat harbor and stops before a ridiculously small sailboat with two sleeping bags dangling from the spreaders to dry.

“That right there, it’s a seventeen-footer,” Brett says. “A couple of guys told me they sailed her down from the mainland. It’s not but about a hundred miles.”

We hang around on the quay, studying the little day-sailer until the waterfront lights begin to come on. By that time, the harbor is dark and quiet. The boat seems to stir, lifting and lowering, with the ghostly, nearly imperceptible movement of the water. We tire of waiting for the crew, and when we return the next morning, the boat, too, is gone, and none of the fishermen know what we’re talking about.

A week later, in the morning, Brett and I are waiting at the port café for the ferry to Piraeus.

When it finally rounds the point into Parikia Bay, Brett turns and throws back what’s left of his ouzo. “Before we start out on this: I’m the captain, and you’re the crew, right?”

The next three days we spend in Piraeus and Athens. First completing the purchase from an American air force officer, finally, assembling supplies and gear for the voyage. We hope for smooth sailing but know how in July, the *Meltimi* can reach gale force for days. Sweeping out of the north, it seems a cooling stroke to the land, but to the Aegean, it is the hand of mischief, stirring the sea into stampedes of whitecaps. Though neither of us has anything but freshwater sailing experience, we’ve both been around charts and compasses; we have plenty of wine and sailing tales from summer camps.

The fateful morning arrives. The boat’s former master gives us a lift, twenty-six miles over the mountain, east, toward the battleground of Marathon. Trailing behind us on its trailer is the newly christened *Corinne*. In honor of her gift to him, Brett has given the boat Gail’s middle name, but it’s not too long before the little vessel’s bulging plexiglass ports, in a forward-sloping cuddy, remind us of a lizard. So before she’s even wet, *Corinne* has earned the nickname of Sea Lizard.

The *Corinne*’s log records July 11 as the day we set sail from a coastal town of Nea Makri. At the beach, sure enough, a stiff north breeze is intersecting the coast at a fifteen-degree angle. Two or three locals come out of a roadside *kafenion* to watch the launching. One, a fisherman, tries to persuade us to wait out the wind, which could take days. Then, when he sees that we’re determined, he takes a last drag on his cigarette and smudges it out on the boat’s bow in the form of a cross.

That day’s log continues: “Almost disastrous start—high winds and heavy surf. *Corinne* led to the end of the quay by [four men pulling on] a line. Outboard mounted

too high in stern. Motor revs wildly, as each wave lifts prop out of water. Wynn tends motor while I set jib. Once released from [tow] line, we are blown landward. Begin making headway just in time to miss nasty iron and concrete rubble serving as breakwater for swimmers' beach. This leaves us dry-mouthed . . . but finally away from shore, *the grand silence!*"

Our first day's goal is the island of Kea, approximately thirty miles southeast, and the first of three ports in our island-hopping odyssey to Paros. For almost seven and a half hours, we steer by dead reckoning, eyes darting to the hazy horizon, then back to the compass. It's a tense first leg; full of adrenaline and serotonin. Because of the wind speed, Brett doesn't want to raise the mainsail, but we're making good time on the jib alone. Somewhere I've read that the old-time sailors chewed tobacco, and for the occasion, so do I. Halfway to Kea, the *Corinne* lurches. From below, we hear the boat's retractable three-hundred-pound centerboard give a great *crash-bang* that vibrates the entire hull!

Though the chart shows nothing but fathoms below us, I can read, *Rocks!*, in Brett's eyes. To my relief and amazement, flippers appear behind, foundering: a sea turtle the size of a bathtub that has just tangled with the boat. The centerboard is built to be cabled into the hull for shallow water. This is done by a winch with a hand crank. In running over the turtle, the heavy centerboard has been lifted, leaving a lot of slack in the winch cable, then dropped again, jerking the cable loose from the winch drum. This leaves the heavy metal centerboard swinging below the boat by one large metal pin, no longer retractable. After an hour with my face in the bilge, trying to fix the problem, the chewing tobacco conspires with the waves. Seeing me turn green, Brett prescribes Dramamine, which cuts the nausea but makes me dazed and silent, until we realize that the thin, white cloud above the haze is no cloud but the whitewashed village of Kea, which is glued into the top peak of the island. As we cheer, the rest of the island becomes visible!

Kea's harbor is fjord-like, well protected from the north. Above the peaks surrounding it, we can hear the rush of the *Meltemi*, while below, a gentle breeze wafts us to the port promenade, where we dock elegantly at the seawall with never a crack of the outboard motor. Brett would write: "We put the *Corinne* to bed, ate with aching fingers, and

collapsed in a [dockside] hotel. Next day, we sat [around the dock] licking our wounds and waiting out the gale."

Later, we decide to climb up to the high village for fresh vegetables and find a unique, locally made sharp cheese; a small reward for the hike. Returning to the harbor, revived somewhat and at the same time fed up with the boat, we move out of the hotel and camp on the beach. We decide to leave *Corinne* tied to the seawall next to the hotel, where the water is deep enough for the dangling centerboard.

We camp around the small port bay, under tamarisk trees. After dark, the tavernas at the back of the bay cast paths of light across the water. Brett passes me the retsina jug, and gradually the evening progresses. We toss pieces of green wood into the fire to keep off mosquitoes. Somewhere along the line we begin to talk about philosophy, and then painting.

* * *

In the beginning, Brett offered to pay me for my teaching hours in his paintings, rather than the usual living stipend. That was in the days when I saw my shipmate as either a con man or oblivious romantic with delusions of grandeur. By the time of Kea, I have to concede that, even if he does have a touch of Barnum in him, his painting has an intriguing vision. And that his painting is the category through which he envisions all the experiences of his life. When I ask him about this, he tips up the jug, then, "Well, why should we stoop to categories? Life hates categories! And yet we can't exist without myth, you know? Some people think being an artist is all about FREE-DOM, and it is, but the freer you are, the stronger the code you need. Being any kind of artist? What function do you serve? No money. Ten to fifteen years before the wannabes drop out. You won't become an artist without some kind of mythos."

For me, there is always an enigmatic quality to Brett's Aegean work, an unresolved tension calculated to slam the viewer's comfortable perceptions sideways, back into second gear; the visual equivalent of a Zen *wan*. Later, I will remember Brett's voice talking about Picasso and Braque, about wanting to up the ante in fracturing space, subjectifying perspective, using line and color so that "near" and "far" become interchangeable . . . He tried all the mediums, but acrylic was tough and cheap. It had the color range he sought and its quick drying lent itself to spontaneity.

One minute we're horizontal by the fire, in sleeping bags, passing the retsina and putting the world to rights. The next minute we're groggy and thirsty as sponges, waking in a ghostly, gray dawn.

* * *

Nine years later, Brett's quest for a unique vision will have produced a feverish array of lyric paintings—dark, dense colors in the first years, later, fractured images curtained by Day-Glo spots that hang before one's eyes like icons of delirium. Curious anthropomorphic figures have evolved: raindrop or paddle-headed men and women, figures capable of provoking both amusement and the queasy fascination of viewing stem-cell homunculi.

After a day and two nights on Kea's languorous shore, restlessness has begun to afflict us. We wake as the sky is beginning to gain color. We try, unsuccessfully, to make out the marine weather report on the radio, but the port is too enclosed, and both of us are too impatient to take another half a day's hike to the upper village. Ultimately, Brett scans the craggy hilltops surrounding the harbor to see what the few, distant scrub up there are doing.

"Doesn't seem like much, compared to yesterday," he says.

We've forgotten how protected the harbor is. Outside, we discover that the wind is still hot from the north. Nevertheless, our plan is to beat upwind until we're well north of Kea's tip, then turn and run southeast for Syros, the capital of the Cyclades.

Kea is three times longer than wide. The first tack upwind is exhilarating, takes us northwest almost within spitting distance of a huge ketch on the opposite tack from us. She's flying French colors. Makes us feel in pretty salty company. After two or three more tacks, it looks as if we have enough leeway. We start across the north cape of the island flying both jib and reefed mainsail, as the quickly disappearing larger yacht has done. The wind and spray are both whistling through our hair, and we're grinning like two dogs with their heads stuck out the car window. Then, about a half-mile off the island's craggy north tip, and a few hundred yards from the point at which we can turn downwind, the *Meltemi* pauses to catch its breath. Needless to say, *Corinne* is caught in the classic pickle: caught off a lee shore. The captain is calling for the jib

sheet, and the outboard—out of the cuddy—at the same time, when the pulley attaching the main sheet to the boom snaps loose! This leaves us one sheet to the wind, with the boom swinging out at obtuse angles to the boat and dipping into the waves every two yards as we're washed toward the cape's gnashing rocks. By the time I've wrapped my legs around the boom and shinned out to wire the sheet back to the boom, we can see flotsam—planks and plastic, bleach bottle—bashing around the boulders. Just as we're beginning to discuss plans for surviving a swim amid the breakers, a whisper arises. With both sails tugging as lightly as feathers, *Corinne* pulls agonizingly past the dead spot.

Twenty minutes later, we're in the channel between Kea and Syros, with the *Meltemi* blowing so hard that we douse the mainsail for fear of being knocked down or losing control of the boom again. Brett's entry, scrawled in the log says: "Kea sped away to the stem. A gale came up of such force that it flattened the swells and we started to plane. Grab a piece of fruit, and some water, and do it now, because . . . then a . . . hurricane came up and . . . for five hours, I sit with a water bottle inches from my hand, and there's no way I can get to it."

For an eternity, we clutch tiller and jib sheet respectively; grim, frozen like department-store dummies, Pompeian mummies. Then, late in the afternoon, a gift of grace. The wind falls, the haze kicked up by a restless sea dissipates, and, as if by magic, we find ourselves gliding down Syros's southwest coast. Behind *Corinne*, the island's blue shadowed sea cliffs retreat northward, overlapping, until distance shrinks them into the sea. Long-winged birds appear, which Brett identifies as shearwaters. They skim the sea, cutting its surface with the lower halves of their long bills. The deliverance is so sudden that we are left, punch-drunk, gawking at the idyll. Our bodies wake slowly to the change, holding for a while to their storm positions. Finally, Brett flattens himself, à la Huck Finn, on the cockpit bench, hands behind his head, and works the tiller with his foot.

After a while, we switch, and I'm on the tiller as we ghost up to a little village on the island's south end. Brett is leaning on the handrail, watching the sun go down. At a certain minute on the horizon, spectacular pink rays shoot halfway to the zenith.

"Oh, no," Brett views the display, "not another one of those garish things!"

Then we break out the ouzo and have a pro forma argument about artistic clichés. We argue all the way into a harbor, which is more open than Kea's and has a breakwater. Here, due, somewhat, to the shallowness of the water, and, somewhat, to the ouzo, the centerboard grounds out, and in the course of docking, causes minor scrapes on *Corinne's* chaffing rail.

We're giddy with fatigue and step off the boat, lurching and rolling on the implacable solidity of the concrete dock. Visible from our landing place is a small taverna with smoke of a grill rising from it. We eat lamb and stuffed grape leaves there. We start drinking wine but finally fly in the face of barroom wisdom because only beer will quench our salt-encrusted thirst. The food and drink give us a brief lift, and Brett begins to talk about a simple course in sailing.

"Who knows?" he muses. "Enough students, you could incorporate an Aegean School of Sailing."

Sailing lessons are good, I tell him, adding what I know about a coast guard program to put reconditioned navigation satellites into small marine businesses. He gives me his pained look.

"No nav-sats, man. Not at the Aegean School of Sailing!" says he. "Compass, Polaris, sextant—the basics."

"What about charts?" I protest. "Or are *they* too high-tech?"

"Of course charts." My friend makes an upward spiral with his forefinger. "I'm an artist . . ."

It's the same dispute we've been having for a year. Though the school is equipped with a few conventional painting aids, like stretchers and easels, Brett lets it be known that he considers actually using them soft. Brett favors hand mixing paints from dry pigments and nails his canvases to the studio walls.

"Canvas?" I exclaim. "Why, cavemen didn't have canvas!"

I accuse him of trying to turn out starving artists in garrets. Then, that evening on Syros, he says something he hasn't said before.

"You don't understand. The school . . . it's not just . . ." He stops a moment to think. "When I got to Europe in '66, I knew I wanted to start my own school of painting. With my own ideas, not one of these overstructured,

paint-by-the-course-number things in the States. I knew I wasn't into keeping up with every fad . . . sorry, 'concept' . . . that came down the interstate. There's plenty of commercial and state art schools for that. As far as equipment goes, it's easy to think you're an artist when you've got a hundred thousand dollars' worth of studio equipment to play with. But there's not many places for students where they're forced to get it clear in their heads, the process they're really committed to. And where it comes from," Brett taps his forehead, "and how basic and deep down it is. They get told, but never confronted. You check out the cave drawings in Spain. The guys who did them dug their own pigments out of clay banks with their fingernails; made their own airbrushing kits out of chicken bones, or bamboo. There's not one day when some university instructor in the world doesn't project those 'primitive' drawings on a dark wall. And there they are, twenty thousand years later, being reproduced on a dark wall again."

In spite of our near disaster off Kea, that island sits in the wind shadow of larger nearby islands to the north of it. The passage from Syros to Paros crosses thirty miles of water, from west to east, where no islands block the north wind. To the north, a thousand-mile fetch of water is exposed to the *Meltemi*.

Intending to get an early start—when the wind may still be low—we sleep on board, in *Corinne's* claustrophobic little cuddy. Even with the door open, it's hot. Getting to sleep is difficult, and the next morning, we sleep through the alarm. I wake feeling oppressed by the prospect of setting out again. Brett and I are both developing salt sores on our palms. We go about our preparations silently, but I can tell by how he moves that he's feeling as battered as I am.

A curious thing happens: I think I've surveyed the dock for other people before I turn my back to the village to pee. Yet, as I'm about to commence, a blond foreigner overflowing her bikini appears a few feet away.

"Where are you going?" she says, taking no notice of me as I struggle to get zipped up. I manage to stammer out the name of Paros.

"Oh." She shrugs and turns to leave. "Everybody goes to Paros."

Brett is grinning as she leaves. "Wow, she's an angel. That's a good sign!"

Ghosting out of the harbor, we refer to her as the Venus of the Limonaki ("little harbor"). The sea is smooth, as we'd hoped. We sail on a gentle breeze, like in the movies. Yet, ever after, we remember that leg as the Day of the Wave. At first, we're skimming along in Syros's lee, with both sails up. Then, as we round the island's south cape, we see whitecaps. None too soon, we take down the mainsail and brace ourselves. Unlike to the chop of the previous two legs, the sea has been pushed into swells as tall as *Corinne's* mast, and soon we're roller-coastering them, flying across a wind that's blasting foam from the wave tops into the cockpit. At first, we whoop a lot, telling ourselves it's a hotdogger's delight.

Our course cuts across the wilderness of peaks and troughs at forty-five degrees. After an hour, we're wedged in like never before, eyes riveted forward, trying to steer ahead of the waves' advancing curls, first rising toward the strip of blue sky, then planing wildly downhill at twice the hull speed: a deadly game of keeping in sync with the waves. Finally, Brett signals for relief. I've watched him at the tiller, calculating how close before the curl of the waves we can ride. Suddenly, I glance behind and wonder if we'll survive what's about to overtake us. I hear Brett shout and find myself fighting to hold on to the tiller as tons of the Aegean crash over *Corinne*. Crisis has a way of lasting forever when you're in it. The sun seems to hover, and every second parses into a thousand distinct units of consciousness, each a second long . . . Seconds later, we are sputtering, knee-deep in salt water, wondering if we'll stay afloat. Later, we will count it another bit of grace that the cuddy door held. Between both of us bailing like submersible pumps and *Corinne's* self-drain system, we've finally managed to get back in sync.

"It's gonna look really stupid if we sink a few miles from Paros," Brett shouts, after a while. "Shelley already did the Mediterranean thing!"

For years to come, Brett will sail the *Corinne* here and there in Parikia Bay, for fishing or picnics, but never again into open water. Nary a group of picnicking art students will disembark without hearing the Voyage of the *Corinne*. When I am present at the telling, I corroborate where I can, smile and shake my head out of loyalty to my shipmate, as the saga grows ever more grand. Yet, I live in secret fear of hubris, and there comes a time when I crack wise, in

company, about his rendition, protesting that he knows it didn't happen that way!

Brett thinks for a moment, then waves away my scruples with the back of his hand. "That's the way it should have been . . ."

By now, *Guernica* has taken on another liter or two of bilge, and we're drifting toward distant rocks. I put my hand into the sea, clutching the last handful of ashes.

So, Brett's doing the 'Mediterranean gig' after all, I think, then open up and watch the grains swirl down in a trail that gradually disappears.

As far down that trail as I can see, something catches my eye; at first, it seems no more than the tumbling of bone fragments. Then, it seems like some misshapen, deep-water creature rising, but it soon resolves into four white dots, which are growing quickly. I manage to tell Gail, "There's something coming up under us!"

Then, *whoosh!* The water on either side of *Guernica* erupts, as four white dolphins fly overhead in unison; two one way and two the other, a sensuous arc over the boat. Water from their glistening undersides rains down on us . . .

Pace, Brett . . . That's the way it should have been.

Traveler and philhellene **Wynn Parks** is the author of two novels set in Greece. Born in the southern United States, Parks grew up an air force brat. His family was stationed overseas in Turkey and the Philippines. He attended Black Hills State University in South Dakota and earned an MFA at the Iowa Writers' Workshop by freebooting as an exploration geologist. In the 1970s and 1980s, he taught writing and printmaking at the Aegean School of Fine Arts on Paros, Greece, where he formed an enduring friendship with Brett Taylor, the school's founder. He now lives in Santa Rosa Beach, Florida.

BRETT TAYLOR

Bringing the Temple Down, 1970
Acrylic on canvas, 37.625 x 55.625 in.

