

A REPORTER AT LARGE

THICKER THAN WATER

A Nantucket family's trial at sea.

BY TAD FRIEND

The stripers weren't biting. After watching clients cast in vain for two hours on Nantucket's sheltered North Shore, Captain Jason Mleccko called his father, who ran the family's charter-boat company, and said that he was heading to the Opening to try fishing the rips. It was a raw, wet afternoon last May, with a hard wind gusting out of the northeast—too cold for fish to be stirring, really—but Mleccko's clients, four twenty-six-year-old guys, remained enthusiastic. "It was nasty out," one said, "but it beat having beers on land."

They'd come in for Figawi, the Memorial Day Weekend rite in which young professionals swamp the island's bars and strip its shops of "I Am the Man from Nantucket" T-shirts. (The weekend is predicated on a Hyan-nis-to-Nantucket sailboat race named for an early competitor's baffled cry: "Where the fuck are we?") After a late night that Friday, the guys woke up at the family summer house of their host, Andrew Curren. Shortly before 11 A.M., they put windbreakers on over their sweatshirts and fleeces, grabbed two twelve-packs of Bud Light, kissed their girlfriends, drove to the pier off Madaket Harbor, and trooped aboard.

Jason Mleccko (Muh-less-ko) was thirty-three and married, with infant twins, but his younger passengers warmed to him right away. A strapping six-foot-five fisherman with dirty-blond hair, Jason had the candid, boisterous manner of a golden retriever. As the guys drank up, with only Jason abstaining, the conversation skipped from fishing to lacrosse to friends in common, the easy lingua franca of young men from the prep-school dominion. Curren, a gregarious I.T. manager, was at the center of the group. He had gone to Washington College with Joe Coveney, a chipper financial-data salesman, and Kent McClintock, a banker and an experienced outdoors-

man. After college, he had roomed in Washington, D.C., with Alex Cameron, a short, smilingly combative man, who'd driven all night from Virginia, where he was attending the business school at U.V.A.

Now, at 1 P.M., Jason pointed to the map of Nantucket sewn on Andrew's fleece to indicate their route and destination. In the off-season, he was a middle-school science teacher at Derby Academy, on the Massachusetts mainland, and he enjoyed explaining things. They'd head west along the North Shore, fishing the shoals as they went, then thread a channel south of Tuckernuck Island to reach the outside of a horseshoe-shaped sandbar—the Opening. "I bet you we'll catch a fish there," he said, "and then we'll call it a day."

Once they arrived, at 1:45, Jason edged the boat toward a region he called the Shallow Spot, where a shoal lurked two feet down. He explained that the tide sucking out over the bar, the "rip," should stir up sand eels and spearing, which attract striped bass. As the guys cast into the white water, he would let the boat drift out with the current, powering back in every so often but staying on the safe side of the breakers. Jason's father, Tom, insisted that his captains observe this precaution: always have the tide pushing you away from danger.

This brand of charter fishing—casting with light tackle from a boat working the edge of the surf—was essentially Tom's invention: a four-hour, six-hundred-and-seventy-five-dollar, rough-and-tumble alternative to the "bluefish buses" that trolled placidly in Nantucket Harbor, some ten miles to the east of the Opening. Tom Mleccko, whose four boats constituted the island's largest fleet, was a taciturn, gravel-voiced man who loved to combat the elements. "The rougher the day, the better the fishing," he liked to say. Over the years, that philosophy had cost him

a broken ankle, a broken arm, and several broken ribs, but gained him the devotion of such clients as George H. W. Bush, with whom he'd conspired to ditch a trailing Secret Service boat, and Jimmy Buffett, whom he'd raced in an impromptu contest—fishing boat against seaplane—and then rescued when Buffett's plane crashed. David Halberstam, a longtime Nantucket resident, wrote that Tom was "by consensus, our best fisherman."

The guys' Figawi-weekend trip had been booked by Kent McClintock's girlfriend, Jenn Fenton, who knew the Mlecckos; in 2008, she'd spent the summer on the island, scheduling trips for Tom and babysitting his grandchildren. "The whole family was warm and welcoming," she said, "and all his clients always told me Tom was the best." Tom's boat was reserved when she called, so the guys went out with Jason. Like his father, Jason was "fishy": he had a nose for the slicks the bluefish left after vomiting up eels, that smell of new-mown grass. He also prided himself on his ability to navigate the white water that stripers frequented. Yet his friend Corey Gammill, who was one of Tom's captains for six years, observed that "Jason would catch fish some other guys didn't, but he also put himself in rough water more. He was trying to push envelopes to create some of those legendary fishing stories he grew up hearing about his dad."

The Opening, described by Robert Lowell as "a brackish reach of shoal off Madaket," is the most ticklish fishing spot in Nantucket's capricious waters. The shoals shift constantly and the waves can arise from four directions, churning like an industrial washing machine. Sheila Lucey, the island's harbormaster, says, "The Opening is not marked with buoys. No one wants the liability." The churn there has capsized



The son of a renowned fisherman, Jason Mleczko “would catch fish some other guys didn’t, but he also put himself in rough water more.”

PHOTOGRAPH BY GRANT CORNETT

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at least four boats in recent memory, and in 2008 a rogue wave swept off both the anglers aboard a boat called the Queen Bee, which kept heading east and wound up, nearly four years later, in Spain.

Capt. Tom's Charters usually fished the Opening in one of its two twenty-nine-foot Hawks, big, beamy boats with an unusually low center of gravity. If a strong wave caught them broadside, they'd just "power slide" sideways. That day, though, one of the Hawks was in Hyannis being painted, and Tom was out in the other. So Jason had taken Jabb, a sporty twenty-three-foot Maritime Defiant. Tom believed that his captains could fish the rips in Jabb if the waves didn't exceed six feet, but he didn't recommend that anyone else try it: "Most of the other captains don't understand what we do and don't have the skill to do it." Jason would have taken Jabb even if the other Hawk had been available; it was his first trip of the season and he wanted the smaller boat's range, so that he could roam in search of stripers. He also liked buzzing along at thirty knots, skipping over the crests like a stone.

At the Opening, there were heavy storm clouds gathering in the south, and the combination of the incoming swell, the outgoing tide, and the twenty-five-mile-an-hour gusts of wind made for thick, unruly waves. Another local captain, P. J. Rubin, had decided to surf the nearby break at Madaket Beach rather

than go fishing that day, but he quickly packed it in: "We had double-overhead waves that cleaned out all the best surfers on the island," he said. Almost all of Nantucket's charter boats cancelled their trips.

After Jason arrived at the Opening, he made a few passes, feeling right at home: when he was eight, on a trip with his father, he'd caught his first striper just off Tuckernuck. The shoals at the Shallow Spot seemed to lie much as he remembered, and the waves, though strengthening, were only three to five feet. Then an eight-footer snapped over the bow, knocking down Joe Coveney and swamping the deck. Joe usually had a good sense of humor, but now he handed his rod to Alex Cameron and sat by the center console, soaked and shivering. The air temperature was fifty-three and dropping; the water temperature was fifty-two. It was Joe's first visit to Nantucket, and he didn't want to be the guy who said, "We should go in"—but he wanted to go in. Jason looked at his phone, saw that it was 2:08, and suggested they take one last pass.

Alex at once caught a bluefish, and the guys cheered: they'd finally blooded themselves, even if it was only a seven-pounder. Jason helped him remove the hook and release the fish, and powered in toward the bar. As he approached the white water, he looked up to see a wave looming over his right shoulder—a nine-

foot mass of water. He gunned Jabb into it and crested the wave before it broke, but it wrenched the boat to port, making everyone go "Who!"—the roller-coaster yell. Jason, who knew that big waves come in threes, shouted, "We're gonna make it!" as he spun the bow toward the incoming surf. The guys, laughing as they regained their balance, were taken aback. Why wouldn't they make it? The second wave, a twelve-footer, hit four seconds later. The bow soared up over the wave crest, then plunged down so hard that it knifed below the surface. Water flooded the deck to the gunwales, washing the tackle bag overboard and sending everyone flying. Kent and Andrew, flung together in the stern, exchanged a look of dismay.

The third huge wave came early and from a new angle, surging toward their port stern. With no time to turn into it, Jason shouted, "Hold on!" and pinned the throttle to outrun it. But at the Shallow Spot there was no deeper water to escape to. The wave caught them from behind and lifted them until they were surfing its face. They hung there for five seconds—their port gunwale tilting overhead, the Yamaha outboard whirling in the air—as if time were taking a breath. Jason still believed that they'd shoot the barrel and make it out. Then the starboard gunwale hit sand, and with fantastic power the wave lifted the boat and hurled it onto the sandbar upside down. All that was visible of Jabb from above was a strip of maroon-painted hull.

Jason had reflexively crouched between his seat and the console; now he was squashed in three feet of water, his head bumping the deck. The steel radar tower atop the center console was buried in the sand, pinning the boat in place. With the motor buzzing crazily and the current swarming around him, it was as if he'd crashed into a hive of bees. His mind went to his father. I'm an idiot, he thought. *We* don't capsize.

Tom Mleczo first visited Nantucket in the summer of 1970. He went with his brother, who was dating a lively young woman named Bambi Gifford, from a banking family that had summered there for three generations. One night, Bambi announced that she was



"For your information, this 'stuff' happens to be my husband!"

going fishing in the morning—any takers? Tom was the only one eager to rise at 5 A.M., and, Bambi recalls, “that sealed our fate.” Casting into a gleaming sunrise off Madaket, Tom said, “I fell in love with the whole thing—my wife, the fishing, the island. It was all a big magical package.”

The couple married and had three children: Priscilla, known as Wink; Allison, known as A.J.; and Jason. In the off-season, Tom taught middle-school science at the New Canaan Country School, in Connecticut, where the students called him Mez and regularly dedicated the yearbook to him. He was one of those charismatic men whose devotion to a subject—from genetics to coaching hockey—was inextricable from his conviction that hard work was vital to mastery.

When each of his children turned two, Tom would strap skates on them and leave them in the middle of an outdoor rink, with the promise of hot chocolate if they skated to the edge. When they crawled off in tears, he’d return them to the ice. Bambi recalls, “The other mothers would say, ‘That’s the meanest thing I’ve ever seen!’” But by the third day the Mleczko toddlers would be skating. Wink grew up to captain the women’s hockey team at Harvard, as did A.J., who also starred on the U.S. team that won a gold medal at the 1998 Olympics. And even though Bambi was wary around the water—as a girl, in 1956, she had been aboard the Andrea Doria when it sank off Nantucket one foggy night, killing fifty-two people—she became the first female commodore of the Nantucket Yacht Club. Everyone in the family had a Nantucket Nectars bottle cap devoted to his or her achievements, except Jason.

The year Wink was born, 1973, Tom began running summer fishing charters out of the island’s West End. He’d make himself a peanut butter, mayonnaise, and lettuce sandwich, then head out from dawn till dusk; Bambi kept the books and manned the phones (while also running a dress shop in town). “Family days” would be more fishing, just with the family. When Tom retired from teaching, in 1996, he and Bambi moved to the island year-round, and he increased his fleet to four boats, all painted flag blue. (Jabb stands



"I'm working part time, but I'm hoping that once I finish my master's they'll up my hours to full time."

for “Just Another Blue Boat.”) “My dad taught us that if you’re the captain you’re in charge,” Wink says, “and if you’re not the captain there’s no shame in that, but you have to listen to the captain.”

When chasing fish, Tom would blissfully lose track of time. Bambi would often be on the verge of phoning for help when Tom returned, his chinos stiff with bluefish blood, and shook his head, saying, “Don’t call the Coast Guard.” This was a Nantucket dynamic known to every whaler’s wife who ever trod a widow’s walk. It had been that way since the English settlers’ first voyage to the island, in 1659, when Thomas Macy captained a small boat from Martha’s Vineyard. After a storm blew up and Macy’s wife grew anxious, he cried, “Woman, go below and seek thy God! I fear not the witches on earth nor the devils in Hell!” Over the centuries, the area’s chopping currents, shifting shoals, and whirling storms caused more than seven hundred

wrecks and earned it the nickname the Graveyard of the Atlantic.

In recent decades, as the island became a tycoon’s paradise, and as the median price of its homes rose above a million dollars, that sense of constant peril diminished. The danger was obscured by the massive yachts and the ubiquitous G.P.S. systems, and also by the island’s hummocky, cranberry-coated topography; though you’re nearly always within a mile or two of the ocean, you rarely catch sight of it. So Tom’s timing in starting his business was perfect: he was offering the old, manly Nantucket just as the new, wealthy Nantucket became eager for a turnkey version of it.

Trapped inside Jabb, Jason tried to squirm under the starboard gunwale, but the surf was battering it into the sand. He turned back, but the bungee cord that held his pliers to his belt snagged behind him. As he realized he

was stuck, he also realized that he was running out of air, and he panicked for a moment. Then he ripped the pliers off his belt, crawled to the port gunwale, heaved it up, and squeezed beneath it.

When he surfaced, gasping, he saw Andrew Curren, ten feet away. Andrew had wormed out near the stern and grabbed a life jacket that was floating by in the froth. It was a child's jacket, so small that it prevented deep breaths and pinioned his arms high like flapping bird's wings, but he dutifully kept it on. Jason paddled over and they swam together to the boat, diving under the rollers as they came in.

As they clutched the gunwale, Andrew shouted, "What do we do? What do we do?" The surf slammed the boat, lifting and dropping it like a bathtub toy, flinging them off. They fought back to it, and Jason was able to scramble onto the hull. When he stood, he saw three heads in the water, fifty feet away. While he was shouting for them to swim to the boat, a wave broke on top of him. He and Andrew were rolled and boiled fifteen yards before they could surface. Jason kicked off his boots to swim more freely, but the waves were all ten-to-twelve-footers now, immensely strong, one after another, so they could never catch their breath.

The fifth time they got knocked off, Jason found himself on his back, being sucked under. His soggy red fleece had become a straitjacket. Gazing up as he sank, he accepted that he was going to die. Then he grew terrified and angry, and he thrashed to the surface, where he saw that Andrew, too, had surrendered to the water. "It's like a warm blanket that settles over you," Andrew said. "I was just going down to the bottom when Jason reached over and pulled me back to the boat."

By now, the corkscrewing of surf and tide had ripped the radar tower off the console, and Jabb began to drift south, toward calmer water. Once Jason and Andrew dived out beyond the break, they were able to wriggle back onto the hull. They stood on this perch, an area about ten feet by six, and peered through the seething wave caps. The others had disappeared. Andrew was still shouting, "What the fuck do we do?" Jason finally replied, "I don't know! I've never been in this situation." Andrew suggested that

they try to flip the boat, so they jumped on one side of it until Jason said to stop—if they righted the boat it might sink. Having regained his bearings, he'd realized he was still the captain.

That was when he saw two heads in the water, far to the southwest. Joe Coveney was closer. He'd surfaced amid a whirlpool and had to swim desperately just to stay afloat. It wasn't until he was fifty yards from the boat that the current eased enough for him to look around and notice Kent McClintock fifteen yards behind him. Kent yelled "Help!" and Joe, hearing him, shouted, "Call the fucking Coast Guard!" to no one in particular. Then Kent cried, "Help me, Joe—I'm bleeding! I'm dying!" The water around him was stained dark red. "I'm not going to make it." "You are, you are!" Joe said.

Joe caught sight of Andrew and Jason waving to them from the hull. He called out to Kent, "Let's get back to the boat!" and took off in a vigorous crawl. He was a good athlete, a former pitcher for Washington College's baseball team, and the water had erased any wooziness caused by the beer. Even so, the swim took ten minutes; his sweatshirt seemed heavy as a bearskin rug. He arrived so weary that Jason and Andrew had to tug him aboard.

When he was able to stand, he couldn't see Kent, let alone Alex. The sea was empty. Filled with guilt that he had left the others behind, Joe said, "Kent's dying—he's not going to make it." Andrew, still wearing his child's life jacket, was overcome; he'd brought his friends to Nantucket, and now, as he kept saying, "they're dead, they're dead!" "Shut the fuck up—we'll find them!" Jason yelled, increasingly afraid that they wouldn't.

In New Canaan, Tom Mleczko walked Jason to school, coached his teams in football, hockey, and lacrosse, and taught his sex-ed class. "I was bombarded with my dad," Jason said. To forestall accusations of favoritism, Tom was hard on him—giving him extra sprints, making him serve team penalties. So, naturally, Jason grew his hair long, cut corners, and took a postgraduate year before attending Hamilton College. He was charming but distractible, promising but perennially boyish—the youngest child you notice on the Christ-

mas card and wonder about, the one whose broad smile hides an uncertainty about who he's supposed to be.

When Jason was twelve, he got busted for jumping a ferry's wake in his Boston Whaler. "Tommy's boy?" the harbor-master said reprovingly. His father sat him down: "You've got to realize that you're Jason *Mleczko*. Respect the history of Nantucket that we're a part of—this is our life, our community. Gaining people's respect takes work, but it also takes work to keep it." Jason listened in despair. "Dad," he said, "I can't get away from you!" On a forty-eight-square-mile island, there was no place to hide.

At fourteen, Jason began to realize why Tom wouldn't answer directly when he asked, "What'd you catch?," saying only, "They had a great time"; fishing wasn't so much about landing fish as it was about making memories. At sixteen, he started working for his father as a striker—local parlance for a mate—and calling him Cap'n, or Cap. Tom would bellow constant fond reminders: "Jase, wake up! Jase, set the anchor! Jase, did you call the clients?" Everyone in the Mleczko operation had a "dog" name: Tom was Mad Dog, Bambi was Top Dog, and Jason was Lazy Dog. Jason earned his captain's license at twenty, but his father watched him for two more years before making him a captain. "When Jason started captaining, he sometimes acted his age," Mike Holland, a family friend who often fished with both Tom and Jason, said. "But he continued to learn at the feet of the master."

At about the time that Jason began running boats, several other fishermen, some of them former employees of Tom's, set up rival operations. It was a small island and a short season, and there were only so many places to fish, so the captains' collegiality was often underpinned by jealousy and murmured trash talk. Some said that Tom ran his boats hard, without quite enough respect for safety. His fleet was up to code, but while the Mleczkos had often talked about fitting their boats with EPIRBs—Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacons, which send an automatic distress signal if a boat flips—Tom had thriftily decided to hold off. Other captains carry self-inflating life jackets, but the Mleczkos

stuck with the old-fashioned kind, stowed in the console. And, while Tom's captains all had waterproof cases for their cell phones, Jason sheepishly told his passengers that morning that, in the season-opening flurry, he'd left his case in his Hyundai, in Hyannis.

In recent years, as Tom entered his mid-sixties, he'd stopped challenging the breakers as much as he had in his youth and had begun to hand the business on. A number of local captains wondered whether Jason was ready. One said, "If you asked thirty captains who's most likely to have an accident, twenty-seven would say Jason." His sister Wink felt it was hard on him to have to compete with all the older captains who worked for the family. But for Jason, who vigorously contested the notion that he was reckless, the only comparison that mattered was with his father. "My goal was always to be on his level—the way he carries himself, the way he can read every situation," he said. "It's an innate gift. I'd like to believe I have it, but time will tell." Reared on tales of wrecks and rescues, he understood that the ocean was a test. He wrote poems about the angry sea and once sculpted a sinking boat ringed with words such as "survive" and "must" and "angry" and "father"; the deck was a drowning face. His father found the sculpture creepy and unsound. "All of us have images of breaking water on the boat," Tom said. "But you control that. You say, 'I'm not going to let that happen.'"

With a surge of joy, Jason saw Kent reappear through the shifting chop, and then Alex, too, much farther away. Jason began screaming encouragement, but they were out of earshot, lost in solitary battles. Kent, struggling to breathe and to stay afloat, was terrified by the blood streaming down his green jacket. Behind him, he heard Alex moaning, "I'm dying, I'm dying."

Kent called, "We have to start swimming to the boat!" He set out, expecting his friend to be close behind. Alex was a strong swimmer, but when he was flung from the ship he'd banged his head hard on something—the hull or the sand. Now he could barely keep his nose up. Cloudily, he realized that he was snagged by two triple-barbed fishhooks—one in his left

sleeve, and one in his buttock—and that his legs were trussed by their line. He panicked, thinking, *I'm not going to make it*. As soon as he accepted his fate, he felt calm enough to duck under and feel around, keeping his eyes shut, because he was wearing contact lenses. At last, he found the fifteen-pound-test line and snapped it. The effort left him spent, and he floated, barely conscious, no longer certain what he should be doing.



As Tom Mleczko searched for his son, he told himself, "Boats flip, but never our boats."

On land, Kent was sarcastic but measured, the capable-seeming one. Now, as he swam against the current, he felt reality receding. A Bud Light can that floated by seemed like a hallucination. One of his shoes had vanished, so he dove under to pull off the other one. It was so hard fighting to the surface that he thought, *This is it*. And then: *I never want to go underwater again in my life*.

Jason, who was standing to exhort him—"You're going to make it, you're going to make it!"—understood Kent's stricken expression: "Going under had become affiliated with death, and we all knew that." Kent heard Jason and picked up his pace. After half an hour in the water, he reached the boat and collapsed on the hull, where Andrew lay atop him to keep him warm. When Kent finally sat up, he was amazed to discover that he wasn't bleeding, after all—he'd just been smeared with Jabb's maroon bottom paint.

Jason turned his attention to Alex, who was thirty yards away and drifting wide of the boat, his strokes feeble and intermittent. His head was often below the surface, but every so often he'd lift it to call out, "Save me, I'm dying! Save me!" Joe said, "They were desperate cries—it was awful." Andrew, Alex's closest friend on the boat, his frequent companion at concerts and Washington Nationals games, said, "I couldn't conceive getting back

in, even to save a dying friend. Once you've been under the water like that, you go into full-on survival mode. I wanted to jump in, I felt obligated to—but it was impossible."

For Jason, it was a terrible decision. If he swam to Alex, what would happen to the others? "Alex," he belatedly, "you swim and you fucking live! You drift and you fucking die! Swim, Alex—swim to live!" Alex angled closer, laboring, cramping, swallowing water with every breath. Jason kept screaming, thinking, *If he goes under, I'll jump in after him, and it'll probably be a mistake*. When Alex was five feet away, Jason lowered himself in, and he and Kent hoisted Alex onto the hull. After nearly forty minutes in the water, his face was blue and his hands were frozen claws. He lay on his stomach, gasping. As Jason rubbed his legs to warm them, Alex tried to thank Kent—who he mistakenly believed had towed him the whole way—but all

COURTESY WINK VAN OGTROP

the others could hear was an incoherent mumble. Still, Alex dimly felt, at least he was alive.

Andrew looked at his dive watch—a Breitling, a gift from his parents that he habitually removed before getting in the water. It was 2:45 P.M. They could see the houses and scrub oaks on Tuckernuck, only a mile away. Andrew, who'd spent six summers as a lifeguard, suggested they swim for it before the current carried them farther out: "If we stay on this boat, we're dead." Kent seemed inclined to agree. Joe didn't want to swim unless the boat sank, and Alex was in no condition to do anything. "We need to get Alex to a hospital," Kent said. "He won't make it."

Jason had been vainly pushing the power button on his phone, which had somehow remained in his pants pocket. Now he reasserted himself. Everything his father had taught him led to one conclusion: you stay with the boat. Jason pointed out that the water was frigid, the seas choppy, and the current dead into them. "If you get in that water, you'll be in Bermuda before you'll be in Nantucket. This boat is the only thing saving us."

"Well, then, what do we do?" Kent asked.

"We stay warm. We survive." He went on, "My dad knows we're supposed to be back—the Coast Guard helicopter will be coming soon." Tom had told Jason that the captain's chief job, when a boat was in distress, was to keep all the passengers calm: smile and talk and keep telling stories.

Kent said that Jenn Fenton, his girlfriend, would also raise the alarm shortly after 3 P.M., because they always called each other if they were going to be late. Joe was optimistic: "I had it all in my head—by 3:30 they'll call us, our phones and the radio won't be working, and then the Coast Guard will be on its way." He announced, "Guys, we'll be out of here by five." Sure, Kent said. Then they asked Andrew the time.

Andrew's watch became critical to the group's well-being: it gave structure to the waiting, and provided a link to the orderliness of life on land, where their loved ones were surely organizing to find them. After 3 P.M., the guys began listening for the helicopter and searching the horizon. An occasional plane flew overhead, and they'd shout and wave, to no

effect. They were wearing dark clothes, against a dark-red hull, in the gunmetal water. Harbor seals surfaced nearby and stared at the five men. Joe imagined that they were thinking, Look at you morons! Jason envied them: they could be on Tuckernuck in two minutes.

It was raining hard now. They discussed diving for the life jackets and flares that might still be in the console, but Jason said it was too dangerous. As they took turns rubbing Alex's back,

is a phrase
coined by Cal Watkins
of the Harvard Linguistics Department
in November 1971

to disparage
certain concerns
of the female students
of Harvard Divinity School.

In a world
where God is "He"
and everyone else
"mankind,"

what chance
do we have for
a bit of attention?
seemed to be their question.

Cal Watkins—
how patient a man—
did not say you carry-tale mumble-
news mar-plot find-fault spoil-

sports!
but rather that
pronouns themselves were
not to blame. It's the Indo-
European system of markedness.

A binary system.
Which regards masculine as the
unmarked gender. As if all
the creatures in the world
were either zippers

or olives,
except
way back in the Indus Valley

effect. They were wearing dark clothes, against a dark-red hull, in the gunmetal water. Harbor seals surfaced nearby and stared at the five men. Joe imagined that they were thinking, Look at you morons! Jason envied them: they could be on Tuckernuck in two minutes.

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in 5000 B.C. we decided
to call them zippers

and non-zippers.

By 1971
the non-zippers
were getting restless.
They began bringing

kazoos to their lectures
to drown out certain pronouns
and masculine generics.
Now, a kazoo

is a toy, a noisemaker.
It scrubs away the air
in that place.
What

can you do
with a piece of scrubbed-away air?
Various things.
You can fill it with neologisms.

Or with re-analysis. Or with
exaptation.
Let's explore
exaptation. To exapt

is to adapt in an outward direction.

You may have seen
pictures of a kind of dinosaur
called the archaeopteryx.
Which had feathers

but did not fly.
Its feathers kept the archaeopteryx
warm.
Meanwhile everywhere

Jason had them switch positions, so that Joe wouldn't bear the brunt of the northeast wind. It was a trick he'd seen penguins employ in a documentary.

Fog scudded in, thicker and thicker. Soon they could see only a quarter mile, then half that. Anyone who came looking for them now would have to get lucky. Sunset wasn't until 8:01 P.M., but to the south a wall of thunderheads was rumbling closer. The clouds were so dark that Alex hazily thought that night had already

ice was melting.
Feathers for
warmth
became redundant.

One night
the archaeopteryx
exapted its feathers—as wings—and
over

the yards of Harvard
rose divinity students
in violent flight,
changing everything,

changing nothing,
soaring and banking
under the moon,
intending (no

doubt) to never come back
but of course
that proved impossible.
They did come back,

they finished their degrees,
they used their wings
to shoot pronouns around
on a big hockey rink

back of the Divinity School.

Nightcold
rushes onto my forehead
and an area of emotion up under
my tongue

when I
recall those games.
But because a binary system
uses numbers in base 2,
requiring

only 1 and 0
to express its differential,
we had to score our games
in scandal and sadness,

in tungsten and long twisting
streets, in bride-habited,
maiden-hearted, thief-stolen,
wind-led, marble-constant

wonder-wounded, to-and-fro-
conflicting, world-without-end
marks
of our own invention.
And to this day

if you look behind the Divinity
School (and if you know
what to look for)
you may see a slight residue of

those nights.
Here's
what to look for:
a pony

standing quiet with one ear

bent.
He seems to have
a bit of capture caught in it.
He shakes his head and all around

you, soaking
the night
and the yards and whatever is
alienable or inalienable there,

comes
a smell like
a new tuxedo.

—Anne Carson

fallen. Everyone's teeth were chattering. No one wanted to seem anxious, but they all kept asking the time. Andrew, who had his arm companionably around Joe, began just waving his wrist at anyone who asked. It was 4:30. Then 4:45.

"Pretty soon we'll be found," Jason said. "Pretty soon now." He suggested another switch of positions, so that everyone stayed busy. "I'd told them the Coast Guard helicopter was coming, to keep their spirits up, but I knew it was

too foggy for the helicopter. And I knew it would take two and a half hours for their cutter to get around the island from Brant Point. So I knew it was my dad or nothing."

Tom and Jason were scheduled together on a special charter at 3 P.M. A family friend named Clark Whitcomb had booked one of the big boats, Purple Water, to take relatives and friends around Madaket Harbor to scatter the

ashes of his late wife in some of the spots she'd loved best. When Tom left the dock, at 3:15, he kept his demeanor stoic so as not to distract from the occasion. But he quietly tried to raise Jason on the VHF radio and his cell phone, calling repeatedly as he puttered from Eel Point to Tuckernuck Harbor to Smith Point and then back up Hither Creek. It wasn't unheard of for Jason to be late or not to answer his cell phone, but it was troubling about the radio—no matter where the boat was, it should be in VHF range.

After an hour on the water, Tom returned to the dock and called his wife: "Have you heard from Jason?" "No," Bambi said. She was doing a Civil War jigsaw puzzle at home with her daughter A.J. and two of A.J.'s children. Tom said he was going out to look, but though he reassured her—"I'm sure Jason's just broken down"—he didn't add his usual benediction, "Everything's going to be all right, baby." Bambi worried, suddenly, that he wouldn't return.

It was pouring, so Tom put on his foul-weather gear. He left the dock at 4:30 and made for the Opening, topping Purple Water out at seventeen knots—as fast as he dared, since he could see only two hundred yards in the brume. Tom steers a skipping boat calmly, his right hand steady on the tiller, but his thoughts were agitated. He briefly considered calling the Coast Guard, then decided not to, estimating that it would take three or four hours for its cutter to round the island. (The officer in charge of the Coast Guard station, Matt Welsh, says that it would have taken at most an hour.) Nantucket's harbormaster has a rescue boat in Madaket Harbor, but Mleczo didn't call her, either. He didn't think he needed backup to find Jabb and tow her in. "Boats flip, but never our boats," he told himself. The waters around Nantucket were life-giving and familiar, almost amniotic.

When Tom didn't see Jabb at the Opening, he continued northwest, to the shoals off Muskeget Island. Nothing. So he kept going, four miles past Muskeget, toward Chappaquiddick. Still nothing. He was alone in thick fog. Apprehension began to steal over him, and as he turned south again he vowed to look even more closely.

Jenn Fenton, waiting at Andrew's

house with a friend from high school, had called and texted Kent five times. Her friend suggested that the guys must have gone for a beer, but at 4:30 Jenn called the Mleczkos. A.J. answered, and said that the boat had probably broken down and that Tom was out looking for it. She wasn't worried: "I thought, Of course Jason's not answering his phone—it's at the bottom of the harbor, where he's dropped it twenty times before." Jenn tried the other passengers' phones, which all went straight to voice mail. When she called the Mleczkos back with this news, A.J.'s stomach dropped. Bambi immediately called Tom.

Dismayed, Tom moved offshore and began serpentineing to cover more water, worried that his engine noise would drown any cries for help. When he approached the Opening, he thought again about calling the Coast Guard. He was beginning to brace for disaster. "I had confidence in Jason. He's good under stress. But you suddenly realize how insignificant you are out here. I've always felt that I had control out on the water—that the ocean was my buddy—and now I didn't."

As the storm drew near, the world went leaden, then charcoal gray: the sky, the water, the occasional soot-colored cormorant. "Seeing a squid boat in the distance gave us perspective on how tiny we were," Joe said. "We were on the same level as all this ocean, a flat, alien plane." As his deadline of 5 P.M. came and went, Joe's spirits sank. Jason had said that any rescue boat would be coming west through the channel from Madaket Harbor, so they'd kept their eyes on that spot, but in the murk they'd missed Tom's boat, and nothing else appeared. Andrew felt that the fog and the storm made darkness their final deadline. The blacker it got, the closer to death he felt.

Jason had the same thoughts. He'd begun with complete faith that his father would find them. As the afternoon darkened, he'd begun to think, If anyone finds us, it'll be my dad. Now he just repeated to himself, "God, I hope he finds us." As he thought about his three-month-old sons, and how they would grow up with-

out knowing him, tears sprang to his eyes. He began kissing his wedding ring and murmuring their names: "Wes and Coop, Wes and Coop." Kent asked, "Are you saying goodbye?" "Fuck, no!" Jason replied, mustering all his bravado. "You guys are lucky you're with me—I'm seeing my goddam boys again!"

At 5:20, the rain stopped, and a few minutes later the fog lifted. Everyone except Alex, who was still in a heap, stood and stretched in the wan sunlight. At 5:40, Jason remarked that they needed to think about plans for the night. He could see the boat's anchor line beneath them, and he planned to dive for it and loop himself and each of his passengers to one of the boat's cleats. "I would have said it was for safety in the night, so if you got washed over you could haul yourself back to the boat. But I was also thinking, At least that way they'll find my body." While he was under the boat, he planned to search the console for a knife or a screwdriver so he could scratch some final words on the hull: "To Wes and Coop, I'm more excited to be your dad than anything else. Thank you for being out here with me." And to his wife, Jenny: "I love you forever, you should remarry." That was a lot of words, though—what could he leave out?

"Boat!" Kent yelled. He'd seen a furrow in the water about two miles off, heading south. Jason squinted, eighty per cent sure it was Purple Water. He ripped the red reflector panel from the child's life jacket and held it high in his left hand to catch the light, waving the jacket with his right hand and standing as tall as he could. They all stared in silence, willing the boat to turn, but it continued on, past perpendicular. Jason crushed his makeshift signal flags onto his head.

When the fog lifted, Tom was still heading south. A half-mile off Tuckernuck, he slowed and turned his gaze to some commercial squid boats five miles away, thinking, *I wish I could see Jason as well as I can see those boats.* He felt numb, empty, receptive. Then he saw a tiny flicker out of the corner of his right eye—a movement that was subtly out of cadence with the waves. He swivelled and stared, not daring to blink: nothing. Then he saw it again—an infinitesimal nod in

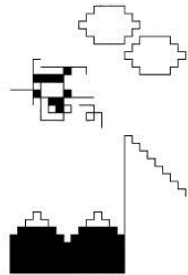
the water. *There they are!* he thought, powering into a right-hand turn.

When Jason saw the wake erupt, tears began pouring from his eyes. He grabbed Kent's shoulder and cried, "We're going home!" Kent didn't stop screaming with joy until Purple Water hove to. When Tom got close enough to count five heads, he, too, was suffused with relief and joy, yet he maintained a stern, rescue-mode demeanor. As he idled alongside the wreck, so that the castaways could step aboard, he said, "What happened?" Then he asked if anyone needed medical attention, and they said that Alex did.

Alex came over first, almost plunging aboard, and the others followed. Tom told them to go below to the cuddy, put on foul-weather gear, and stay warm. Andrew suddenly succumbed to motion sickness and began vomiting over the side, as Tom patted his back. In the cuddy, Joe leaned his head on Kent's chest and began weeping: "I'm so sorry I couldn't help you more!" Kent said that he understood—there was only so much anyone could handle out there.

Up top, Jason threw his arms around his father, who gave him a preoccupied pat and said, "What are we going to do about that boat?" Jason stared, hoping his father would say, "You take the wheel, and I'll go anchor Jabb," but he didn't. Tom knew he was behaving stiffly, and he later said, "I felt that, as Jason's employer and his father, I should make this whole thing better—only I didn't know how." Jason unspooled the line attached to Purple Water's anchor, cut a hundred and fifty feet, and threw the anchor overboard. Then, reluctantly, he followed the anchor into the water and swam the line to Jabb. As he began making clumsy half hitches, tethering the line to Jabb's bow with numb fingers, the passengers came on deck, astonished that Tom wasn't immediately taking Alex to the hospital, and even more astonished to see Jason back in the water. When the task was done, Jason swam to Purple Water's bow, but couldn't pull himself onto it. Tom looked over, askance, and Jason said, "Cap, I've been in the water for four hours—I'm at about ten per cent." He finally crabbed himself aboard.

As they headed home, Tom called Bambi and said, "I found 'em." She burst into tears. Then he called the local boatyard to ask if it could salvage Jabb



that day. The head of the boatyard said no, given the weather—the storm would last three days—and reminded Tom to alert the Coast Guard. Instead, Tom called his friend Sheila Lucey, the harbor master, to say that “one of my boats capsized, and we’re on our way in.” She would meet him at the dock with two ambulances, and Alex would be airlifted to Massachusetts General, in Boston, to get the water drained from his lungs and be treated for a concussion.

The fog and the cold rain had rolled back in, so Tom told Jason to go below and get warm, but Jason said, “I’m staying up here with you.” When they reached Madaket Harbor, their home waters, Tom eased back on the throttle, turned to his son, and pulled him into his arms. Immediately comforted, Jason was glad he’d been the one to anchor Jabb. “My dad was right,” he said. “You don’t leave your boat.”

The next morning, Tom’s grandson Oliver was christened at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church. The choir sang the familiar hymn:

Eternal Father, strong to save,
Whose arm hath bound the restless wave,
Who bidd’st the mighty ocean deep
Its own appointed limits keep:
Oh hear us when we cry to thee
For those in peril on the sea.

Tom started to cry, and Bambi, seeing her husband in tears for the first time since his father died, wept and hugged him. Then Jason, recalling the feel of Wes’s warm breath on his neck when he got home the night before, began to cry, and soon the entire family was weeping.

As news of the rescue flashed around the island, the Mleczkos were surrounded by well-wishers. They were lauded in the local press, and later recognized with life-saving awards. Some captains embraced Tom and said, “What happens if my boat rolls and you’re not around?” But there were also murmurs about Tom’s judgment in going out to search alone, and a strong feeling that Jason, as one captain put it, “had made a bad decision”—to fish the Opening, in those conditions, in that boat—that ultimately led to him having to make a bunch of great decisions to save lives.” If even one passenger had died, every captain would have suffered.

Yet the passengers all felt that it was an accident, and that Jason had behaved heroically. He’d gathered them, kept them on the boat, mastered their doubts



“O.K., first things first—did everyone sign the card?”

as well as his own—saved their lives. They were less taken with Tom, who’d actually rescued them. His failure to call the Coast Guard bewildered them, as did his inability, at the moment of rescue, to express the empathy he’d made his clients feel for forty years.

A sense of connectedness had frayed out there on the water: the ocean separated them, then brought them back together, but not all the way. Andrew jumped into a swimming pool not long afterward and felt sick to his stomach. When Kent was tired, he’d find himself replaying the incident, helplessly watching the boat hang in the air and then begin to flip. It took a week for Alex’s mind to clear, and when people asked him, “How was your Memorial Day?,” he’d say, “Oh, fine,” too embarrassed to go into it.

For Jason, seeing the fog lift just as his father arrived was “a religious moment.” He was convinced that no one else would have found him. But though he had been inspired by his passengers’ ferocious fights to get back to the boat, their will to live, he struggled with the burden of having put them to the test. He’d always imag-

ined the ordeal would be his alone. “When I’m lying in bed and I can’t sleep and it’s dark, I can put myself back under the boat anytime,” he said. With a determined smile, he added, “But I choose not to.”

Two weeks after the accident, Tom tried to tighten a boat’s engine belt with the engine running, and cut off the last inch of his right index finger. “It was total stupidity,” he said. “I’d been doing it for forty years without consequences, and it caught up with me.” He slid the fingertip into a plastic bag and tried to keep on fishing, but his clients insisted that he go to the hospital. “After that, people kept saying, ‘Two strikes, Captain—what’s the third one?’ I said, ‘No third strike—it’s totally unrelated.’” He installed EPIRBs in his boats this winter, but he was reluctant to acknowledge any larger lessons. “We’d still have gone to the rips that day,” he said. Yet he would wake at night to find himself back at the Opening, peering out at the vast dark sea. “What if I hadn’t seen that little movement? What if I’d been looking two degrees to the left? The ocean—it turns out it’s pretty impersonal. It doesn’t care.” ♦