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## China Lake

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## *China Lake*

Every spring has days the breezes jump  
the valley's flooded groove and blow across  
in just the way that lets a sailboat shoot  
the China narrows on a sweet beam reach.  
Waiting until May set free a day like that,  
I asked along a friend I hadn't sailed with  
since the first time he took sick.  
The doctors thought they fathomed it:  
two more months, at most. In the thin green  
hospital light he'd taken, in turn, his wife's hand,  
my wife's, mine, squeezed until the anger  
at having worked his youth away to master  
more and more sophisticated versions of the proper thing,  
lifted and left him free to show his love.  
Those flooded moments lifted us all,  
but my transcendence was half-blind:  
he seemed the only one dying.

He didn't then, though twice more he's been forced  
to master the art, nobly  
and cheerfully, and twice he's been reborn,  
though the last time it took two years  
to escape the grief of his return.  
He'd been so well-prepared. Two years  
he walked among us, survivor of a war  
we couldn't honor, couldn't understand,  
until this spring, we found ourselves talking  
about a sail, watching for the right day.  
And then we were launched,  
boiling out past sunstruck hillsides  
where apple trees unfurled their petals  
and slower hardwoods blended forty shades of green.

Halfway down the narrows,  
upwind waves went livid with whitecaps  
and a puff dark-streaked down on us so fresh  
the hull jerked like a child's slapped cheek  
and the lee rail buried as we shipped buckets  
of ankle-numbing water while the wind rose

from hums to screams in the rigging  
and then a shackle exploded and we caught  
each other's eyes an instant, expecting  
the mast would crash, our arms held rigid  
over our heads like clocks the stroke before noon  
but locked the way time stops when your blood  
surges—but it was only the jib that fell—not good,  
but not disaster. And the gust backed down.

We both knew if a wind that strong swung back  
to its prevailing groove we'd never make it  
down the narrows, much less home.  
I don't know why we were so sure  
the breeze had done its worst  
but we grinned as we gathered in the fallen jib, grinned,  
and then laughed as we hiked straight out, shoulder-to-shoulder,  
our backs almost grazing the waves as we surged  
down the narrows, past miles of pluming hillsides,  
planing towards the open center of the lake.

PETER HARRIS