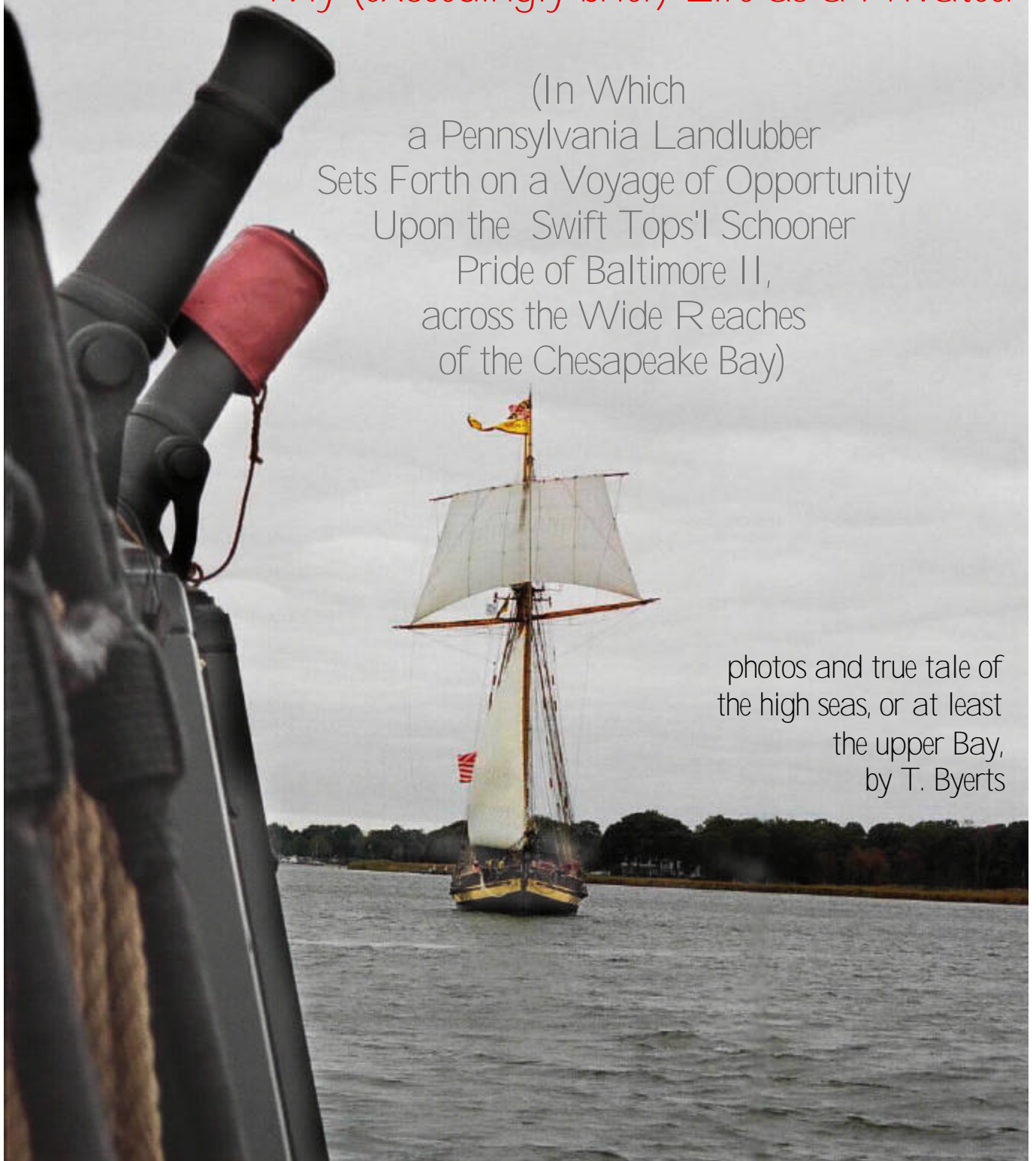


Two Days Before the Mast

My (exceedingly brief) Life as a Privateer

(In Which
a Pennsylvania Landlubber
Sets Forth on a Voyage of Opportunity
Upon the Swift Tops'I Schooner
Pride of Baltimore II,
across the Wide Reaches
of the Chesapeake Bay)

photos and true tale of
the high seas, or at least
the upper Bay,
by T. Byerts





Halloween

(cue soundtrack...)

I admit it; I probably watched *Pirates of the Caribbean* way too many times. Might have been the stars; Johnny Depp and Orlando Bloom could play accountants and still rake in more booty than Captain Jack could dream and scheme of.

...or there might have been more to it. Adventure, romance, nice boots, wind in your hair, spray up your nose, broad wings of canvas spread to the wind, what's over the next horizon.

That's what a ship is...a ship is...freedom." says Captain Jack.

Really? Is it?

What on earth brain-fart encouraged our ancestors to crawl onto a hull the size of Mom and PopPop's Florida-bound RV and cross the Great Unknown (Here There Be Dragons) to come to new shores? What made their descendants pit falcon-sized privateers against the vastness of the best navy in the world?

What's behind the romantic imagery of *Pirates*, or *Master and Commander*, or *The Little Mermaid* and *Peter Pan*?

I do some art and storytelling of my own, and I understand the difference between the romantic image (the wild black horse racing the wind) and the reality

(mud, poop and blood-sucking flies). The actual experience is all of those and more (skewering watermelons in chainmail, on a wild black mare I've trained myself, or the Wild Black Mare herself training newbies with eternal patience).

To tell stories, especially in my specialty, the fantasy genre, you need to know how the real world works.

Which is how I found myself on a pirate ship, on Halloween...



It's October 31, 2007, I am hiking along the dark water's edge in Baltimore's Inner Harbor, carrying a glowing jack-o-lantern full of M&Ms, and a backpack that 20 years ago weighed a lot less.

...and boarding a ship straight out of a faerie tale.

Yep, *ship*: the whole

* the cliché "whole nine yards" is a reference either to the nine yards of wool needed for a Scotman's kilt, or to the yards holding the sails on a full-rigged ship

nine yards *... and gaffs and booms and masts and sails and wooden decks and cannons and baggy-wrinkles and two huge schoolbus yellow butt-kicking diesel engines for backup when the wind is blowing the wrong way and a foot tall pink plastic Jesus with orange hair standing guard over them.

Technically the word is not "pirate", but *privateer*. Her name is *Pride of Baltimore II*, and she is a modern recreation of the wicked swift and agile "sharp-built schooners" (or Baltimore Clippers, as they were later known) that originated in the Chesapeake Bay (especially in the shipyards of Fell's Point) between the American Revolution and the War of 1812. The image at the beginning of the first *Star Wars* movie sums up a truth about that time of our "second war of independence"; the tiny Rebel Blockade Runner fleeing before the Empire's battleship rumbling endlessly across the screen. In the same scene, spoofed, in *Space Balls*, the ship has a bumper sticker that says: "we brake for nobody".

Our navy was nearly nonexistent, so letters of marque and reprisal were issued to anyone with a fast ship and a yen to take on a "cruise of opportunity"... the opportunity being to nab



slow, fat merchant ships of “the enemy” (the profits therefrom going partly to the youthful American Government and partly to the ship’s owners and crew), or to evade the “we brake for nobody” British Navy and her blockades while carrying crucial U.S. supplies and trade goods.

Like the rebel blockade runners of Star Wars, or Han and Chewie with their swift little *Millennium Falcon*, smuggling useful stuff past the noses of the Empire.

These enterprising folk were called “privateers”, and helped us win both “wars of independence”. One particularly successful



privateer was Thomas Boyle, and his ship *Chasseur* (“Hunter”, or “Chaser”). They took many “prizes” (commandeered ships), briefly held the British Isles under a one-ship siege, posted a note on the door of Lloyd’s of London to this effect, helped increase British insurance rates and the disposable income of the

longship *Sae Hrafn* (768) chases schooner *Sultana* (1768) at Solomon’s Island, MD...arrrr, they have engines!



I traded my longship oar for a kayak paddle this day to pursue two ships. I shot *Sae Hrafn* in the midst of a catastrophic steerboard failure: note the guys hanging over the starboard stern trying to keep the steerboard from going by the boards.

struggling young U.S. Government.

Han Solo and Captain Jack would be proud.

Chasseur returned to her home port and gained the nickname “Pride of Baltimore”. The modern interpretation of this unique bit of American history sails on a very different mission;

as Baltimore’s goodwill ambassador, as living history, and to remind the odd land-lubber that they probably should have done this sort of thing when they were twenty.

At twenty, I was busy training horses, and knocking people upside the head with broadswords. I’d done some fairly exuberant living

Blenny on my old Anglo-Arab, *Saraf*, me on the mustang *Lor*



history; medieval, Viking. I'd even spent enough time on the Longship Company's Viking "ships" (the largest being about 40' long) to know the difference between a sheet and a shroud. I have a sea kayak, I am a certified advanced open water diver, I grew up on *Sea Hunt* and *Flipper* and Jaques Cousteau.

Staring at the aerial maze that is Pride's rigging, the first thought that comes to mind is; *if I touch that...the whole thing'll probably come down.*

Whattheheck does that do anyway???"

On the Longship Company boats, we spend a lot of time rowing. I don't see any oars on Pride. On the longships, we occasionally get a good wind at our backs, hoist up the big square thingie, and blow downwind for awhile. We generally don't leave the quiet backwaters of Solomon's Island. It'd be too hard to row back. We are entirely devoid of butt-kicking engines (unless you count Bork the Mighty), and religious icons to encourage them to not break down (unless you count the



stuffed raven who sometimes accompanies us).

I am not a sailor. I grew up in a decidedly land-lubberish Pennsylvania Dutch farming family. My



dad was afraid of canoes. His most death defying moment wasn't marching through Europe in W.W.II, surviving bombardments while delivering supplies as part of a service battery. His scariest moment was crossing the Atlantic, when all he could see was endless water and the other ships in the convoy.

I stare at the artfully belayed ropes ringing the deck. Coiled in neat piles on the deck. Looped in mad macramé, incomprehensible to mere landlubbers. There's a lot of rope. Line; if it has a job, it's a line, I heard someone on the *Kalmar Nyckel* say that at a dockside program once.

I am definitely not a sailor. I have no idea what the job of any of these pieces of rope...line...is. None of them are attached to a single big square thingie.





Not Your Normal Living Room

My friends, Julie and Abe, have shuttled me to Baltimore, after leaving my “land ship” (an ancient van called *Fearaf*) in a hopefully safe place near the dock in Chestertown, forty miles across the Bay. Inner Harbor is creepily dark and devoid of trick-or-treaters. We circumnavigate the harbor, spot the faint dark lines of masts; *Constellation's* massive towers, and the sleek cutlass shapes of *Pride's* raked masts.

Silence, darkness. Looks like nobody's home.

We hail the ship, a tall blond sailor named Freeman appears; I can remember his name because Morgan Freeman once co-starred with the *Pride* in *Amistad*, though I think Morgan Freeman had a larger role. Freeman invites us aboard, gives us the tour. The jack-o'-lantern with the M&Ms goes onto the “if it's sitting here it's fair game” cupboard (they quickly vanish). My friends are duly impressed by *Pride*, then they too vanish back to Pennsylvania.

I lug my gear into the appointed guest cabin and decide next time the cameras are going in a

separate bag; preferably with its own pack pony. Belowdecks, at first, a ship has a disconcertingly familiar feel to a landlubber; it looks like a room, a study, a nice restaurant booth, a cabin in the woods with polished woodwork and copper behind the stove.

I remember being belowdecks in *Sultana* last year, on the Chester River, on a two hour tour. In the kind of chop that would be a *yee-hah!* in a kayak. The visual sense was of being in a still, quiet room. Yet my ears told me something was amiss; there was a weird sense of being somehow out of balance; until I real-



ized, of course, the room *is moving!* The lack of horizon, of visual reference beyond the room, fools you into thinking you're on solid, still ground.

Slowly I begin to see the small details that make



Below, on a ship, different from your living room.

The cabin is far roomier than anything the guys from 1812 would have had (unless they were, say,



a captain or something). It contains two bunks, some stuff left over from *Pride's* last dock exhibit (including something that looks remarkably like a locked treasure chest), an immersion suit, some pfd's, a mighty fine Pendleton wool blanket, clean towels, a deck prism and a disassembled bicycle. The bike is a conundrum for a moment,



until I realize that when you dock in a strange port, the crew needs wheels; and it's much easier to hang a disassembled bike on the bulkhead than a disassembled car.

I am advised; "don't put anything heavy, or breakable up high". Better yet, put it on the floor where it can't fall any farther. My landlubber brain goes

"huh?" Then I realize, while the bunkroom is demonstrating utter stillness right now, on open water it is a room in motion. Rather severe motion at times; motion potentially resembling the contortions of a bucking bull. Another crewman points out the handholds strategically designed into various surfaces throughout the main salon, and how



the doors are either closed, or held open by hooks (never left swinging).

The long table (which will fit the entire twelve person crew plus a guest or two, if they're



skinny and squeeze in) has two inch high wooden walls surrounding and subdividing it, to prevent lunch from falling off in a gale. The plates (unbreakable) are appropriately navy blue and have rubber on the bottom to prevent sliding. They are not, however, square, like the old British Navy plates,



ship's (awesome) cook Lu

whence came the cliché *square meal*. Mugs are hung from mug racks in the galley. One mug is a classic Star Wars Chewbacca design, an ode to Captain Miles, who gained the nickname of Chewie for his hairy countenance. Dish storage is simple and efficient slotted cupboards which won't launch lunch plates in high seas. Everyone washes their own dishes; a pan of suds and a



pan of rinse water conserve the limited water on board. Refrigerators and food storage are built into the counter that separates the galley from the main salon, and, most amazing to me, under the floorboards (wish my kitchen had storage under the floor). Decor includes some beautiful dark woodwork, polished copper behind the stove, a watertight bulkhead and its attendant submarine style door at each end of the room,

and the raked base of the mainmast on the other side of my cabin. Most land-based living rooms have an entertainment center at one end, we have a good view of one of the big yellow engines and the pink plastic Jesus.

I am introduced to the function of the Head. Fortunately it comes with instructions on the wall, for the technologically impaired. It growls like a dyspeptic dragon, for two very loud





*Pride's foremast and square topsail, foresail furled on mast.
You can just see the tip of the mainmast to right, er, starboard.*

ten second intervals; enough to wake up the entire ship, and anyone within a league or two. I feel very guilty about late night head calls.

I volunteer with a local county park (Nixon County Park, York County Park System), several recent projects I've been involved in center on water conservation (a touch room; "ocean", and a mural on the Codorus Creek watershed which ultimately flows down the Susquehanna and into the Bay we are traversing). The irony of a ship is that it moves across the world of water; and it has limited space to carry useful, potable water. Though Pride has desalinization equipment, that runs on energy provided ultimately by diesel fuel. A ship is a small, floating ecosystem with limited resources. You become very aware of how you use water, light, heat.

A ship of the pre-industrial age has some in-

teresting answers to energy conservation. The obvious one; wind power. True, it takes some man/woman power to heave and haul up those magnificent canvas wings, but they do their job better than diesel fuel and props. And the Baltimore Clipper design lets you use wind that is coming from nearly everywhere but in front of you. Most of its sails are "fore and aft", triangles

or triangles with the tops cut off that run from bow (front) to stern (back). They can also be swung out to either side of the ship as the wind shifts. The "square rig" doesn't really mean square sails (though they are nearly square), but set square to (across), the centerline of the ship. A fore and aft rig can sail closer into the wind than a square rigged ship. Pride is a square topsail schooner, so she has the advantage of both rigs: thousands of square feet of not-square rig, and a couple of square topsails to boot. When there is almost no wind, a "clipper" can crowd a lot of canvas into the sky to catch what there is. Much of the on deck gear is more or less period; winches and windlasses and such; burning calories, creating muscle, teamwork and communication skills, while hauling up an anchor or gaff. Our love affair with labor saving devices has pretty much gained us wide butts, heart disease, diabetes and high fuel bills.

My favorite bit of 1812 tech is the Deck Prism. These ornate bits of

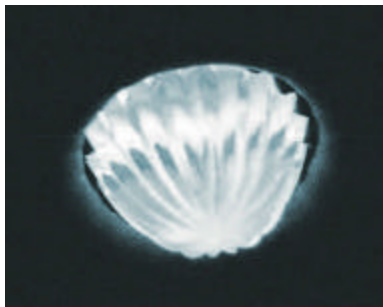
Furling the topsail; Downrigging Weekend, Chestertown, MD, 2006)







grapefruit sized glass are imbedded throughout the deck, flat side flush with the deck, catching the light of sun or stars, faceted dome protruding into the cabins like small chandeliers. During the day, they let in a fair amount of light into the otherwise dark cabins. (The main living areas are lit by skylights of varnished wood and glass). On my first night



in Inner Harbor, my deck prism picked up the Baltimore lights, and glowed like a small blue moon. The next night, moored at the mouth of the Chester River, with nothing but starlight and a few glints of civilization on the horizon, the prism still produced its moonglow. The light is mostly one-way; from on deck, even with lights on below, only a faint fire-glow escapes upward. The crew likes a dark deck; it keeps your night vision sharper. Underway in the night, ships do not have head-

lights.

Sound is different on the water. I am decidedly visual, not auditory, but even I notice the way sound travels across water, paddling in my kayak, or how it becomes muted, warped underwater when I'm diving. Living in a wooden ship is like living inside a large wooden drum. No sound goes unnoticed, by the whole ship. Wednesday night, Inner Harbor; feet on the deck as crew come in late... some weird, annoying *beep beep beep* coming from the direction of the

navigation room... sirens somewhere in Baltimore... trains... *trains?*... a low flying aircraft of some sort... then, somewhere about three am, dead silence, in the midst of Baltimore.

One of my favorite sounds is that of water on wooden hulls. I have never set foot on a modern sailboat (though I have jumped off a perfectly good diesel powered boat, at sea, to look at the sunken boat below). In 1984, the Longship Company took the good ship *Fyrdraca* (32' long, 12 oars, one square rigged





Even dawn over Baltimore's landscape of concrete and steel is more fantastic when viewed through the spider-web pattern of the shrouds.

Coffee, Cook Lu's Real Breakfast (quiche, big basket o' fruit, something marvelous with potatoes, other goodies). Morning Muster. I'm on Port Watch. Cameron, the only other Guest Crew, is a sailor, with his own 40' sailboat.

Yup, I'm the only landlubber. Cool. Bear with me guys.

First order of the day: squeegee the gunnels.

Huh?

Keeps the varnish

sail) on a six day voyage down the Potomac. I remember lying against the hull, one night when we were moored in the river, and hearing the water slosh up and down the lap-strake hull.

The sound of adventure. Of what's over the horizon (even when you've got it on a chart somewhere).

Wednesday night, Inner Harbor, *Pride's* hull is silent, except for the distant

city noises.

Sea Shanties, Sail Plans and Squeegees

Thursday morning; I work at night, I do not get up at the butt crack of dawn. I bought a travel alarm just to make sure I didn't commit a grand guest crew goober and require a crewmember to haul my sorry butt out of bed. I woke up without any prompting.



looking better longer, if you scrape off the dew.

(Cue soundtrack, shot of ship under full sail against sunrise, somebody standing magnificently on a yard ...) you picture hauling on lines singing bawdy sea chanties, standing on the top with the wind in your hair, manning the wheel in yellow foul weather gear with rain blowing up your nose...you do not picture perching on the gunnels with a squeegee.

Reality is way weirder than fiction.

Reality on a ship entails a lot of hurry up and wait. The atmosphere re-





*Docking maneuvers:
how do you park a
170' ship...
carefully, very carefully.*

ship (the Longship Company's latest "ship": *Sae Hrafn*). Lines are thrown (weights attached to thin line goes first, then the heavier dock lines can be hauled over). Great loops of line nearly as thick as my wrist are thrown over pilings, tightened up. Crew climb from ship to dock with the ease of aerial acrobats. Fuel hose is hauled on deck and, literally, down a hatch into the engine room, orders are relayed, tanks are full.

We nose out into the circle of water that is Inner Harbor, the great bowsprit swings like a compass needle and we head out; past Fell's Point where Thomas Kemp and other shipwrights once turned out "schooners, pilot-boat built" (*Tidewater Triumph*, Geoffrey M. Footner), past Fort McHenry (rockets red glare, bombs bursting in air...some guy named Key wrote a poem about it...). *Pride's* fifteen star/fifteen stripe flag is the same kind that flew over Fort McHenry that night.

One by one the sails spread, like dragon wings.

With a great deal of help; each sail requires a

mains rather laid back till around mid-day when we motor over to the fuel dock. We take on a small cargo of wood, I help tie it up in bundles, feeling somewhat useful. Docking maneuvers commence; *Pride* is about 170' sparred length, (96'6" on deck): this is trickier than beaching a 17' kayak, or docking a 39' Viking long-







(some which would be modified slightly for younger company), there are orders called out and repeated (thus the one giving the order knows it has been heard and understood). There is the one-word chant of "turns" called, like a period on a sentence, at the end of any effort, when the last bit of line has been turned and fastened securely on its cleat or pin.

About half the crew is young women variously shaped and sized. There are no anorexic runway

highly coordinated dance of crew heaving and hauling on lines. It's amazingly difficult, and requires something like Olympic level gymnastics at times, with crew throwing their entire bodies into tightening up a line, squeaking the last bit of slack out of it. There are no bawdy sea chanties here, though there are chants



Clichés in action: "down the hatch".



models here. No fifty dollar painted nails, no high maintenance hair, no Fashion Brainfart of the Week. They're real and solid and beautiful and brilliant. They kick butt at some tough jobs. They carry the responsibility of caring for this multimillion dollar piece of technology, they nurture this great living beast of wood and canvas and lines humming with the power of the wind.

My guest crew kit came with a Sail Plan; an illustration of Pride's sails



and their names. She's not as complicated as a three masted square-rigger, but hard enough for me to get it all straight. There are two masts: fore and main, the fore is forward, the main is taller and aft (toward the stern of the boat, that is; the boat butt). The main-mast is set slightly abaft (behind) amidships (middle of the boat), on it is the mainsail, with its huge boom extending astern (behind the boat). A furled mainsail is folded on the boom, in a long, neat bundle with a really big stick (the gaff) on top of it making a sort of wood and canvas hot dog. There's a lot of heaving involved in raising the gaff with its attached mainsail; fully raised, the gaff angles out from the mast, it and the mainsail forming a shape like a giant triangle with the top corner cut off.

The foremast is set well forward, and also has a gaff, but no boom; the sail is "loose-footed"; it has to be, it's so large that it reaches well past the main-mast. If it were mounted on a boom, the boom would get stuck at the mainmast as you moved the sail to catch the wind; you would

only be able to sail in one direction. It furls a bit like old style theater curtains, drawing and folding forward. Atop the foremast is the topsail (tops'l), the only thing that looks fairly familiar to me; it's a square sail, a small bit of canvas compared to *Pride's* other sails, but still larger than anything we've ever flown on *Sae Hrafn*.

Then there's the pointy bits up front: slung between bowsprit and foremast are a set of long triangular sails, like the steering primaries of a raptor's wing. Staysail, jib, jib tops'l (topsail, in sailor-speak). We set

two of them, I am mystified which. There are more sails that could be added; ring-tails and stuns'ls (studding sails) and topgallants.

Those are best left to very light airs, or very big water with lots of room to run and maneuver.

Thus arrayed, we sail out under the Key Bridge and into the Patapsco River. Cars honk, small boats veer closer. Even in Baltimore, a 170' ship under full sail is a rare enough sight to gather dropped-jaw interest. I peer up at the cars passing over the bridge and for a moment I see through their eyes.

It's the picture I've seen in dozens of photos; in the books, on the postcards, on the website.

And now I'm in the picture. I stare up at the great wings, stained the creams and ivories of leagues and winds and rains and seas and adventures.

I really really need a fish-eye lens. Even the wide-angle lens of the little throwaway camera can't take it all in.



