

SIMON FAITHFULL

FLASH 500

FOUR DAYS AT SEA

Day 1

The *Joni Ritscher* leaves berth 941. On the dock the cranes and the mountains of containers are still. In the open water ahead there is a channel marked out with slowly pulsing lights. The ship glides between glowing beacons that top the swaying buoys. Green lights pass by on the left, red lights wink by on the right. Shadows of ships pass nearby. A towering cliff-face of steel passes on our port side and for a while blocks out the entire sky. The other container ships make the *Joni Ritscher* seem like a river barge. The sky gets darker and the waterway gets wider.

On the distant banks we pass power stations and chemical works – castles of white industrial lights and a wobbling flame of burning gas.

The last lights are behind us and in the blackness we move with the swell.

The engines throb through the ship.

Day 2

There is a small bird that flies around the ship – dusty coloured like a sparrow or a warbler. An accidental stowaway – something fragile from the land. We are now on the ocean, but the bird is still flitting between the oily cables and railings. Somehow it seems to know that it must stay with the ship. It's a calm day and at the moment when it flies from perch to perch, it is still faster than the air. What will happen when the weather changes?

I imagine the bird blown by the gales – flying further and further over the surf looking for the metal island in vain.

Day 3

Passing Land's End there is a faint grey line on the horizon and for a moment my mobile phone finds a network – two flickering bars of connection blowing in the wind. The last contact or news from dry land for nine days to come – I send a text before the bars flicker away.

Day 4

The container ship is ploughing straight towards the setting sun. The steel plates beneath my feet are throbbing with the drone of the diesel engines – pushing the metal through the waves.

The ocean is endless in every direction. A liquid planet spinning through space. As we travel across the water we live by a twenty-three-hour clock. We lose an hour a day as we chase the sun – thumping through the waves in the opposite direction to the Earth's spin. But we are losing. The water is too thick and the planet is too fast – the sun races towards the horizon and we fall behind into the following shadows of twilight. The cold sun is almost lost behind the curve of the sea. A final lunge of the ship's prow down into the water and the last sliver of gold evaporates behind the waves. The darkening sky is enormous. The wind blows uninterrupted across hundreds of thousands of miles. The *Joni Ritscher* lurches and moans in the swell, but above the rolling containers the first stars are perfectly still.