



## *Siren Call*

*John Fowles*

**T** rue islands always play the sirens' (and book-makers') trick: they lure by challenging, by daring. Somewhere on them one will become Crusoe again, one will discover something: the iron-bound chest, the jackpot, the outside chance. The Greek island I lived on in the early 1950s, Spetses, was just such a place. Like Crusoe, I never knew who I really was, what I lacked (what the psychoanalytical theorists of artistic making call the "creative gap"), until I had wandered in its solitudes and emptinesses. Eventually it let me feel it was mine: which is the other great siren charm of islands — that they will not belong to any legal owner, but offer to become a part of all who tread and love them. One's property by deed they may never be; but man long ago discovered, had to discover, that that is not the only way to possess territory.

It is this aspect of islands that particularly interests me: how deeply they can haunt and form the

personal as well as the public imagination. This power comes primarily, I believe, from a vague yet immediate sense of identity. In terms of consciousness, and self-consciousness, every individual human is an island, in spite of Donne's famous preaching to the contrary. It is the boundedness of the smaller island, encompassable in a glance, walkable in one day, that relates it to the human body closer than any other geographical conformation of land. It is also the contrast between what

can be seen at once and what remains, beyond the shore that faces us, hidden. Even to ourselves we are the same, half superficial and obvious, and half concealed, labyrinthine, fascinating to explore. Then there is the enisling sea, our evolutionary amniotic fluid, the element in which we too were once enwombed, from which our own antediluvian line rose into the light and air. There is the marked individuality of islands, which we should like to think corresponds with our own; their obstinate

separatedness of character, even when they lie in archipelagos.

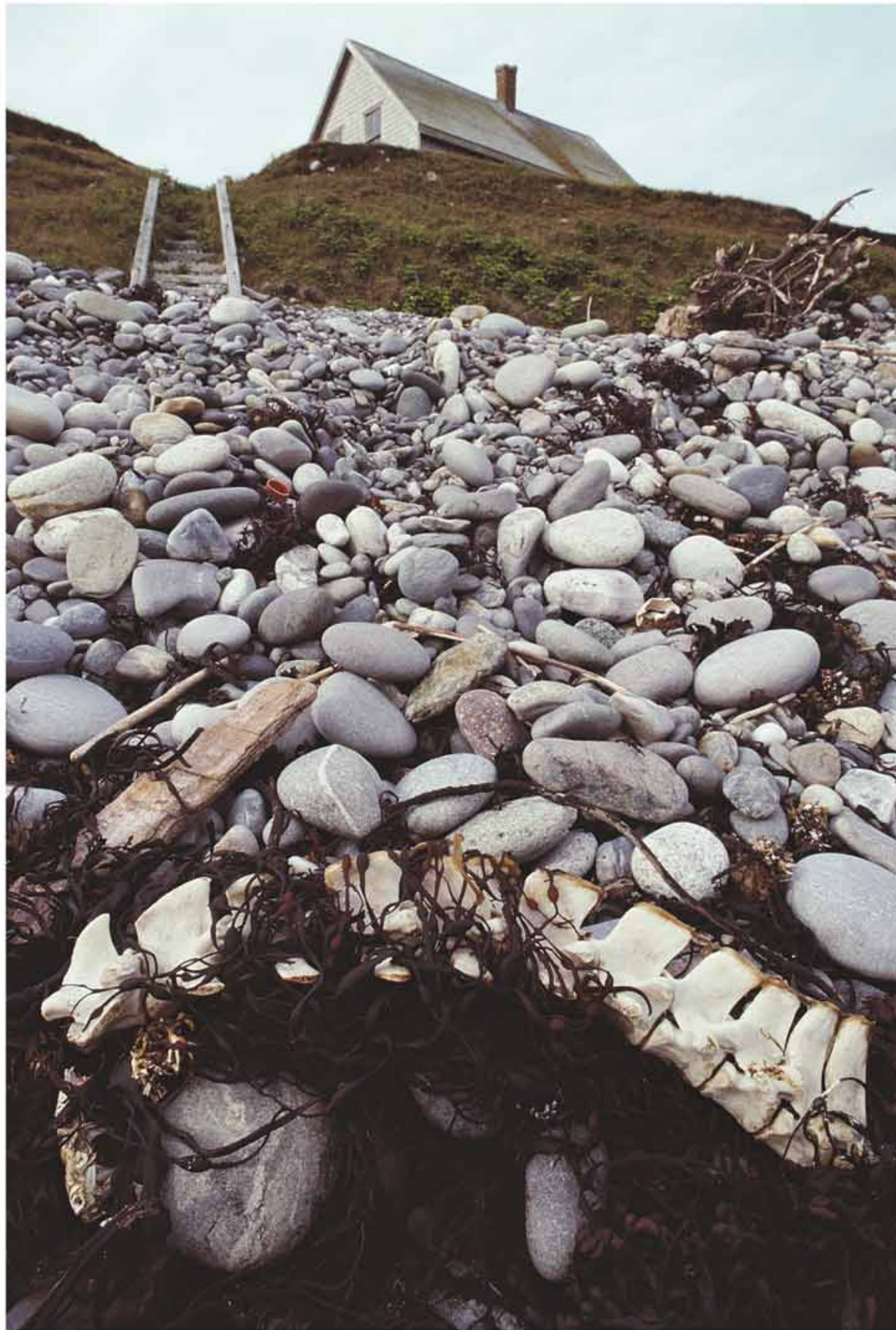
Island communities are the original alternative societies. That is why mainlanders envy them. Of their nature they break down the multiple alienations of industrial and suburban man. Some vision of Utopian belonging, of social blessedness, of an independence based on cooperation, haunts them all.

Since the proximity of the sea melts so much



PETER BALSTON

Above: *Bronze Age*, Jamie Wyeth, 1967



PETER RALSTON



*The Wind*, Jamie Wyeth, 1999

in us, the island is doubly liberating. It is this that explains why indigenous small island communities, at least in the long-discovered temperate zones, are on the whole rather dour and puritanical in their social ways and codes. They have to protect themselves against the perennial temptation of the island: to drop the necessary inhibitions of mainland society. Islands are also secret places, where the unconscious grows conscious, where possibilities mushroom, where imagination never rests. All isolation, as the cold bath merchants also knew, is erotic. Crusoes, unless their natures run that way, do not really hope for Man Fridays; and islands pour stronger wine of forgetfulness of all that lies beyond the horizon than any other places. "Back there" becomes a dream, more a hypothesis than a reality; and many of its rituals and behaviours can seem very rapidly to be no more than devices to keep the hell of the stale, sealess, teeming suburb and city tolerable.

All desert islands, perhaps all desert places, are inherently erotic, as countless stranded individuals have realized. We all, whatever sex we are, want to know why we are alone; why has that universal yet obstinate human myth, the one we gen-

erally call God, so forsaken us?

I first began to feel the releasing power of *The Tempest* when I lived on Spetses ... the lack of a Prospero, the need of a Prospero, the desire to play Daedalus. It is the first guidebook anyone should take who is to be an islander; or since we are all islanders of a kind, perhaps the first guidebook, at least to the self-inquiring. More and more we lose the ability to think as poets think, across frontiers and consecrated limits. More and more we think — or are brainwashed into thinking — in terms of verifiable facts, like money, time, personal pleasure, established knowledge. One reason I love islands so much is that of their nature they question such lack of imagination; that properly experienced, they make us stop and think a little: why am I here, what am I about, what is it all about, what has gone wrong?

1999