

## An Assignment on Malaga

Mary Pols

It is considered unprofessional for a journalist to cry on assignment. Not that tears are welcomed in any work setting, but the weeping journalist sends a signal that they are compromised in their ability to do their job of observing and recording and staying out of the story. Within old school journalism it is considered more appropriate to crack a joke about some hard, emotional topic than to cry about it. That's not to say the job can't be done if tears are shed, but anyone seeing a crying reporter might be skeptical. Like seeing a hairdresser drop her scissors and pick up a butter knife.

This is why, on the 12th of July in 2018, at the *Re.Past* performance on Malaga Island, I needed my sunglasses. As soon as I entered the clearing where the meal would be served I was overwhelmed by the beauty around me. The lushness of the ferns behind the tables, so untouched, so pure, was striking; Rousseau with Maine fauna. But the physical beauty of the island was not new to me. I'd been here before at a key point in my life a decade before. Thirty years ago, I had lived two miles away from here for many summers, and lived with the various distorted legends of this island.

What was so moving to me first were the temporary structures, pieces of stagecraft created by teams from the Bates College theater department. There was a small house, exquisitely crafted and opened at both ends, so as to funnel the guests onto the stage of the clearing. To get there one walked past cardboard cutouts of people, reproduced from images of people who had lived here on Malaga more than a century before. A man playing a violin, facing toward the mainland, a woman, perched on another knoll, facing out toward Bear Island.

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But soon I saw that it was the living people – playing music, sharing stories, laughing, shedding tears –who held the most powerful beauty within this place. I saw Craig Hickman, who I knew as a legislator and had interviewed before. His hands were bandaged from a fire on his farm just days before, the skin on his face damaged. I had been anxious about him for the last two days. But he was here. He had come.

Most of the other guests were already sitting down, had already spread their cloth napkins on their laps and were sipping dry hopped cider or sun tea, served to them by young people not just in period dress, but in period manner, reserved, standing ramrod straight and self-possessed. I took my seat, noting the aesthetic marriage of the blue willow plates, the wildflowers in makeshift vases and the navy-blue Daniel Minter etching, “Malaga Girl” on the cover of the program. I took off my sunglasses and put on my reading glasses.

I had arrived at the island on the last boat over from Sebasco Estates and been taking notes nonstop at that point, conscious that I had to catch up, fill up, be ready for everything still to come. A hush was slowly spreading across the expectant crowd, led by the sense that we were all here now and the *Re.Past* would begin soon. The first stage of anxiety a reporter often brings to an unknown assignment had faded. I knew this was too special to fail me. The second stage of anxiety had arrived; will I fail it?

The first words I read on the program were William Faulkner’s:

*The past is never dead.  
It’s not even the past.*

This is when I awkwardly wedged the sunglasses over my reading glasses to hide my eyes.

On the boat over I had seen an old acquaintance who I met first in the early 1980s, when I was waitressing nearby. In those years I was going to a college in the South where I spent a semester reading Faulkner. While I had felt in some ways the same as I had been when I was 21 and teasing him and being teased by him, the old acquaintance had not recognized me among the crowds of strangers boarding his boat to go to Malaga. His eyes had changed, gone cloudy, though I knew he was not quite 10 years older than me. He was wider, he moved slower, he no longer seemed to have the permanent undercurrent of good cheer I had known him for. We had always called him by the name of a fish; a nickname for a Maine man. I said who I was and saw him searching his memory and grasping the name but not necessarily the shared good will, from when we were part of the same thing. Today I was part of some other thing, some other event that meant he

and his son, running the other boat, would get paid. We spoke but our rhythm of speech together had changed. The past is never dead, but our claims on it do change.

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The first time I passed close to the shoreline of Malaga Island was in the summer of 1984. I was working at Sebasco Lodge, a summer resort in Phippsburg.

This job I had, I thought then, was the best summer job a college student from Maine could ever have. In the dining room a couple dozen of us worked hard in short bursts in the morning and again in the evening. In between, we did as we pleased. I had grown up in Brunswick, so I was both away from home and close enough to it to still feel at home. We made what felt like buckets of cash tips and served from a menu so simple that at dinner there were just four options. We waited on guests who were mostly interested in hearing what we were majoring in.

This was the era before anyone cared about internships. This was the era when we hardly noticed that there were no people of color working at the resort and that most of our guests were white.

We planned for little more than trips to the beach. And parties, of course. That summer we were particularly set on a booze cruise and I remember it hanging out there as a promise for what felt like months, although it couldn't have been more than a week or two.

The cruise started after sunset, not long after the dinner shift ended, and had been timed so we could pass through a channel between the mainland and Harbor Island that grew shallow at low tide. From there we would head up into the wider expanses of the New Meadows River. The next good-sized island was Malaga, and at high tide you could pass between it and Bear Island, even in a boat as big as the one we'd chartered, which held about 50 people.

Something went wrong. Maybe we'd come a little late and the tide had started to go out. Whoever was captaining the boat made an error and we got hung up somewhere right near Malaga, either on some fishing gear or maybe a rock. It was the kind of crisis that involves inconvenience, but not panic. It gave us time to look around, to stare out at the lights on shore, at Water's Edge, the little restaurant in Sebasco Estates, and the fishing piers, or at Malaga itself.

I chose to look out at Malaga, which was a darker shape against the dark sky. The woods felt dense even then. I did not know that the name, Malaga, meant “cedar” in Abenaki. I do not think I even knew who the Abenaki were. Maine schools did not dwell much on the ways of indigenous people then; we focused on the wars with other countries. To me and to most of the others on the boat, Malaga was a vague legend, told in riddles of prejudice and ignorance. A bastardization of the story of Benjamin Darling, the island’s first settler, led me to believe that the island had been either a dumping ground for unwanted black sailors, or perhaps a far northern terminus of the Underground Railroad.

By this time I knew enough to know that the people who lived on the island had been taken away, and that was clearly wrong. But there was enough vagueness in the way we shared these stories that in my young mind there also existed a possibility that it had been in some way for their own good. The propaganda the state had put out there was a powerful force, a salvation narrative acting as a veil over the truth even 70 years later. We weren’t questioning such narratives then; we were thinking that *Driving Miss Daisy* probably deserved some Oscars.

The vocabulary of race I’d grown up with was coastal Maine liberal. This perspective was about a thousand times more limited than I thought at the time. Reading *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as a young reader and being proud that Harriet Beecher Stowe had written it in your town was no true education. Maine was painfully white in the 1980s, which meant that few of us had any direct exposure to confrontation around race. We heard plenty of racist language but it happened in what felt like a vacuum. At my college in North Carolina, I was disturbed by the chasm between whites and blacks I saw there but still naive enough to think that a result of *that* city’s problem. In short, I knew nothing of race in America.

I knew nothing of the history that Bear Island was considered as a likely site for another resort at the turn of the century, and that part of the reason the residents of Malaga were told to leave the island they called home was that they were considered a blight on what was meant to be a landscape for tourists.

Hanging on the rail, with my drink in a plastic cup (a Fuzzy Navel: peach schnapps, vodka, orange juice, delicious, disgusting) I stared at the island and wondered at its fate. I did not believe in ghosts, but this place had an aura, a ghostly sense about it. Or more of an emptiness that felt notably strange. It was so close to shore; you could row there so easily. These were the kind of places that were normally filled with summer houses. Maine islands were things people craved. Malaga had legendarily bad poison ivy, but was there no hope for

anything good to ever happen there again, because of the bad thing that had happened in the past?

There were electronic voices on the sea. Eventually someone responded to our call for help. Someone came on a smaller boat and helped us get loose or get power back or whatever it was that we needed. Someone came to help was the point. I imagine it now as the man we called by the name of a fish, who lived in the village and had a boat he lobstered from in a casual way, and knew the water and engines and most things you needed to know around here. He worked at the lodge, doing maintenance work and driving the garbage truck. It may not have been the man we called the name of a fish, but it was his way to show up when most needed and so in my mind, I imagine it was him.

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Maine was the place I assumed I would likely leave and the larger country, America, was my destination then. I assumed that I would find places that challenged me more, suited me more, where life would explode into full flower. Cities were like fashion to me. This had separated me from some of the people I worked with at the lodge, who would stay here always, wearing one good reliable outfit called Maine. They were staying. I was going. Maine would always be the place where I was from, but likely not where I lived.

I eventually made my way to California. There I studied journalism and began a career in newspapers, returning to Maine for visits in the summer. My sister and her husband rented a house in Phippsburg for some weeks, often in August, and I'd join them there for a week or so. They had kayaks and a small sailboat and we'd paddle over toward Malaga but we'd never land. By then I understood more of the true history of the island and the stain it represented on Maine's history. Nor was I naive enough to think of what happened to the people of Malaga as an isolated incident. It was a dramatic and egregious demonstration of racism in a predominantly white population. It was the thing we knew about. The locus.

In the summer of 2008 I came back to Maine for nearly a month. I'd published a memoir and taken a buyout from the California newspaper I'd been writing for and I was taking some time to figure out my next move. The newspaper business was crashing but it was too early to realize how terrible the next decade was going to be.

With what felt like a luxury of a longer visit, I planned more tourism than usual. Maine Coast Heritage Trust had bought Malaga in 2001 and was slowly

making it more accessible to visitors, although only during the day. That summer they were offering a walking tour of the newly completed trails. My brother and I signed up for the tour. We arrived at the dock at Sebasco Estates to see that the man driving the boat was the man we called by the name of a fish. His son was there too, playing first mate. We greeted each other happily — everyone remembered everyone, easily — and he dropped us off at nearly the identical spot to where I would land with the Bates group for the *Re:Past* event a decade later. We waded to shore and joined the group walking the island, which included several staffers from Maine Coast Heritage Trust.

The trail circled the island and the group, maybe a dozen of us, set off in a direction that took us first along the shore that faced the mainland. It was hot and buggy and we stuck to the trail, avoiding the legendary poison ivy. My brother peeled off to take photographs and I wished that he had not. I felt very conscious of being a visitor to place that should be sacred. I wanted to follow rules. It was a place that bore painful scars. What we saw of where the Malaga homes had been — wells mostly — felt like gravesites. Growing up in Maine I was well used to seeing the cellar hole remnants of old houses in the woods, but there was nothing romantic about these past lives interrupted. California was deep in its foreclosure crisis at that point and those abandoned homes felt eerie but like places in waiting to be revitalized. Malaga was so achingly empty; even with the carefully constructed trails, it seemed to be waiting for no one.

At the end of the tour I waited for my brother while the rest of the group left on my old workmate's boat. The man we called by the name of a fish would be bringing a second group for another tour, so I had some time to fill. One of the Maine Coast Heritage Trust staffers was waiting too; she'd be leading the next tour. We decided together to swim. The water was colder than it was in the cove where we were staying, and greener and cleaner and more of all good things. We moved fast to warm up and then, when our bodies had adjusted, floated. For the first time on Malaga I felt how it could have been a home, and how it should have stayed a home. A thought came to me of how happy I was in Maine and how perhaps after all these years away, I could come back and live in this place that was my first home.

Two years later, I did so. I was reviewing film then, for a national magazine, and the job traveled with me. A few years after that, I was laid off from the magazine gig and I applied at the local newspaper. Which brought me back to Malaga and to the *Re:Past*.

My editor pronounced it Ma-lah-gah instead of Mal-a-gah when she told me to go. She wished she could go herself, but she had work to do in the office. Her

instructions were kind but vague. Could I find the story and bring it back and write it fast?

The opportunities in journalism, even a journalism limping along in the 21st century, are extraordinary. To get to talk to strangers and learn something new every day still feels uniquely special to me. But the pressures of smaller staffs and more frequent deadlines and fading readerships push up against that specialness. In this tug of war, all too often you are yanked over to the side of sadness. I had to fill a slot in the paper customarily filled with coverage of sustainability; I had to plug a square hole with a circle. To fill it, I wrote about the hops still growing on the island, which the archaeologists studying the island believe were planted by the evicted Malaga residents. I wrote about how the food cooked by Leslie Oster represented real recipes and ingredients grown locally in that era. I wrote about the wells the islanders had dug and even crammed in some elements of what the archaeologists had learned about climate change from the island.

I distilled. It is the reporter's job. I tried to weave in the grace and kindness and generosity of what Myron Beasley had envisioned, and why, but I did not write of the heart. I did not write of the way I was so intensely moved to think about my past and this island, or how the island felt alive in a spiritual sense. That is not often the stuff of newspapers. We have our grace notes, and then we have the everyday. What happened on Malaga on July 12, 2018 deserved all the grace notes. At its core, this celebration seemed an exercise of healing. Not the commemoration of a politician or the assessment of an archaeologist or a journalist, but rather, the celebration of the lives that had been there, before the ruin. To attend felt like being in the truest of churches and the deepest of schools.



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