

CROWHURST

by Mark Beeson

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SCENE: **The Sargasso Sea, on and around a trimaran**

In, on the sea, PORPOISE

Music and porpoise dance throughout in various places

PORPOISE: In the beginning, stories teach us –
Porpoises leaping, careering, following shipping –
When Ceto was busy about Earth's creatures –
Porpoises blowing, porpoising, flying and dipping –

She set the wind to move the ocean –
Porpoises leaping, careering, following shipping –
And carefully studying water's motion –
Porpoises blowing, porpoising, flying and dipping –

(Where it was convex, where concave) –
Porpoises leaping, careering, following shipping –
Moulded the porpoise from a wave –
Porpoises blowing and porpoising, flying and dipping.

Look!
Look into the eye of the wave;
White the wave, white; white the sun in the eye of the wave
As white as the eye of fish fried
Where it drops in the pan;
Look, look, till blindness clears;
Green the body, green as a mermaid;
Green its hands, blue its features,
Blue as the sky of dusk its shawl –
Mother Ocean! Mother of sea-things,
Blue-veined bosom nursing the pollock fry,
Rearing the herring, mackerel's riches,
Flesh of the sea-swine, banks of cod,
All that we feed on –
Mother Ocean, be kind to us
In our search for food,
Show us to grounds unplundered still
By human greed.

Come, fellow porpoises of my school,
Intelligent creatures, fond of play,
You see that boat, squat on the weed –
Investigate, for that's our rule.

No-one knows what the boat is doing
Sailing in circles at snail-pace speeds,
One man aboard, nobody crewing,
Simmering idly among long weeds.

In, on the platform of the trimaran, CROWHURST, dressed only in shorts, and carrying a note book

See the sailor, here he comes
Walking on deck, holding a book
In which he is always writing, writing.
Sailor, what is it? Why do you look
Haunted by something, what are you fighting?
What is this fear that gnaws and numbs?

Is it the sea that frightens you?
Monster with glistening scaly back -
Arching, tossing, foaming, hissing,
Keeping you guessing,
Running, reaching, on either tack?

Is it the snarling crests of the waves?
That pack of sea-dogs, tugging and ripping
This way, that way,
Roaring, foaming
Over the coaming,
Boiling in cockpit, round the hatchway,
Sending green sailors to ungreen graves?

Is it the gusts dropping from the clouds
To throb in the sheets
And rattle the shrouds
And rip out the cleats
And ruin the subtle alignment of gear
Designed to self-steer?

Or is it loneliness?
The deadliest enemy of all.
Day after day with no one to speak to
After the radio call;
Day after day among sea voices,
Wave cry and wind cry;
Day after day with the same choices
Of what to eye, what not to eye;
Day after day of shadow and hush
In water and sky.

CROWHURST:

Porpoises, none of the things you've mentioned
Troubles me. Let me answer you, point by point.
First, I'm sailing a race.
That's why my boat looks squat – she's a trimaran,
The latest design for speed. The race
Is for single-handed yachtsmen around the world –
That's why I'm solo, becalmed out here
In the weedy Sargasso Sea. Believe it or not,
I'm told I'm ahead. The boat I was chasing
Was driven so hard on account of my progress
That it broke into pieces and sank. So much for snail's pace.
As for the book which I write in, that's my log,
The record I'm keeping, my course plotted day by day.
It's true I'm a little concerned at this stage

By my radio's failure – but I'm sure I can mend it.
I want to speak to my wife, you understand.
The sea's never frightened me. No, on the contrary,
I find my respect for its many phenomena
Gathering daily. The faunal variety
It tosses up on the deck for inspection
Constantly amazes me. Talking of monsters,
I met with a prize one this morning – thirty-two limbs
I counted, and noted it all down for science.
The waves and the wind have taken their toll -
The outrigger floats are leaking, and screws
Keep popping out of the self-steering gear
Because of vibration caused by my speed.
A number of spares, it's true, were forgotten
In the rush for departure at Teignmouth.
You couldn't suppose, though, a seasoned sailor
Who's weathered the roaring forties, and rounded
Cape Horn, would have many qualms
At a short jaunt home through the temperate showers
And squalls of the North Atlantic, could you?
Oh yes, I am lonely at times, and want
Very much to speak to my wife back in England.
For the most part, however, I like being alone.

CROWHURST tinkers with some electronic equipment

PORPOISE: Like the blazing sun
 Roaring against a sky of lonely blue
 Glory
 Is solace to men who are loners such as you.

 How sweet it is
 To taste glory, most envied of fruits,
 The prize
 And ultimate goal of all man's noble pursuits!

 How glorious too
 To sail between cheering harbour ends,
 To see
 Enemies humbled, and hear the praise of friends!

CROWHURST rises from the electronic equipment

CROWHURST: If only I could mend my radio set,
 That would be glorious. I don't care much for the rest.
 I'd rather, to tell the truth, have a quiet homecoming
 In the shadow of my home port's
 Hilltop at sunset
 With only my wife there to meet me. That's more my style.
 The thought of a grand reception is worrying.
 I might disappoint a crowd of supporters
 Expecting a glamorous ship and her captain.
 Both I and my boat are somewhat ...shall we say unkempt.
 It isn't conducive to glamour

Being cooped up at sea in a feverish cabin
For nine long bachelor months.
The trouble with this voyage happened
Before it had started.
There wasn't the time to test things -
And some vital gear was forgotten.
I had such plans for her, Teignmouth Electron.
Complete with a mini-computer and system
To pull herself up from a Cape Horn capsize.
But someone mislaid the pipe for the pump
And the wires were never connected.

PORPOISE:

Yes, we remember
Those weeks in the Channel
Following a curious boat with its several hulls.
We heard the cursing,
The exasperation
Of someone aboard.
We saw the difficulties
Encountered to windward, driving the new boat
Westward to Teignmouth, fighting the overfalls,
Slowly from Norfolk.

Nonetheless,
This was to be expected,
On a maiden voyage with a fresh design.
We thought he would see to it:
Gradual correction,
Coastal sailing on his summer holidays,
Or a brief trip at Easter to France.

Imagine our surprise then
When we saw the preparations,
The stores piled high along Teignmouth pier,
The television cameras, the news reporters,
And learnt at last that for this vessel,
Ready or not,
A serious voyage was imminent.

After our fashion
We porpoises escorted her
Under the green-browed Ness.
The raw bulk of the red cliff
Overshadowed the grey October waters.
Then we swam eastwards
Heading for Sidmouth
And a favourite fishing ground off Portland,
While she, under jib and staysail,
Tacked towards Plymouth into the night,
Crammed with unfathomable devices.

And that was the last we saw of her
Until yesterday in the heat of the weeds.

CROWHURST:

Stifling, stifling the heat,

Day on top of day, with no breeze at night-time,
The air sizzling and the waves alight,
The lapping of water like a flame flapping at the bows,
And the metal pan of the ocean spitting the sun
Like hot oil into my eyes.
Stifling, stifling the air,
Thick as a blanket, no space, oppressive,
White sky blazing, blue white-hot,
Stiff and sticky as a whipped egg-white.
Not even darkness is soft –
The night glares phosphorescence:
White the green, white, white the glare
But never milky,
Or the milk is the milk of dandelions –
Bitter and green.
Green weeds wrap me round.

PORPOISE: Over the green meadows
Of the flowering ocean
We weave in the white petals
Like the honey-bee,
As swift as the sea-birds' shadows,
On our mettles,
With an unwearied motion
Browsing leisurely.

Over the green meadows
Clustered with umbels of frothing white,
The glossy meadows blue in the clouds' shadows,
Flowering hedges of combers,
Buttercups of sunlight,
Through the salt air of the sea's aromas
Porpoises fly like shadows of swallows,
Flexible as the waves, in and now out,
Diving through crests, leaping across hollows,
Aiming this way, that way, switching about –
Change that keeps us the same
Shunning the changes you name.

CROWHURST: Am I to infer you disallow Dame Progress?

PORPOISE: Yes, yes. For what you call such is an ogress.

CROWHURST: And technological advances too?

PORPOISE: Well, and what have they ever done for you?

CROWHURST: Look at my boat! She's miles out in the lead.

PORPOISE: She isn't what you hoped, is she? Concede.

CROWHURST: My radio, my gadgets, wonders of invention?

PORPOISE: Your radio's dead I thought I heard you mention.

CROWHURST: My theories then, from Relativity?

PORPOISE: You haven't told us those yet, I agree.

CROWHURST: I haven't time, I'm so absorbed in thought.

PORPOISE: But will that win the race? Is my retort.

CROWHURST: Confound the race. I'm bound to win it now.

PORPOISE: You're bound to win it? You confound me! How?

CROWHURST: Quite simple: I'm the best contestant left.

PORPOISE: I see. The reasoning is very deft.

CROWHURST: And so it should be for a philosopher.
That's what I feel I have it in me to become.
Day after day at the mercy of wave-forms
Dazzled by the drills of sunlight on altering water
Or at night by the strangeness of phosphorescence.
Such close contact with elements cuts one off
Like a curtain from trivial forecasts and memories
Driving one always further towards abstraction.

PORPOISE: To think for oneself is dangerous
And never more so than when completely alone.
Thought is a social thing –
There's mother-and-child to start with,
But cultures, traditions, yes theories even
Depend on the group.
Language begins
From what one is doing in common.
Thoughts expressed by language
Should take account of this.

We porpoises for instance:
Small, cetaceous mammals,
Communicate by relationships.
There wouldn't be any point
In us thinking on our own.

Humans are mammals too
Who also, perhaps, once lived in the sea.
How can they dare to deny
Their primate heritage,
Blood of baboon and chimpanzee?
Or even a hint of seal,
The hairless ones who cry?

CROWHURST: The question is this: are we apes with computers?
Does that in itself compute? Or can we transcend it
And by our higher intelligence grow into gods
Traversing the Cosmic sphere with thoughts disembodied?

PORPOISE: Though in zoos some suffer the fate
 Of getting machines for tutors,
 Apes in their natural state
 Would find no use for computers.

 The smell of the jungle floor,
 The patchwork light in the canopy,
 Must mean to the ape far more
 Than any interior panoply.

 The ape has a lot more sense
 Than to think it enjoys pure thought,
 Feels little difference
 In infinite or nought.

CROWHURST: *(Suddenly exuberant)*
 It's all a matter of the will. What I want
 I can have, if only I'm ready to will it.
 If only I'd realised before that I had the potential
 To grow to become a god, then how much suffering,
 Anguish, torment, and terror that would have saved me!
 How much doubting and lone deliberation
 Dealing myself out hands in the dead of night
 And playing my options! It's all so simple now,
 Unimaginably transparent.

Out CROWHURST

PORPOISE: He goes below deck with his book in which he is writing,
 Writing, writing to stave off whatever it is he's fighting.

 Doubt and lonely deliberation
 Are the lot of the man who takes on the world alone,
 Far out to sea with the waves' agitation
 Chaffing his spirit and wearing his flesh to the bone,
 Anguish and torment and terror
 In the face of mystery and the unknown,
 With no margin for the soul's error
 In all the wide space over which his body is blown.

 Nothing is simple at all
 Excepting the mundane task in front of your eyes.
 Beyond that unknowns maul
 Reason so terribly reasoning is unwise.
 Feeling and common sense
 Fare better, but intuition takes the prize –
 Of all the mind's instruments
 This is the one least vulnerable to surprise.

Music and dance to divide the speech here

 What is there left to a man, alone with the waves,
 Alone with the back of the wind, but contemplation
 Of all he has been? What he is and will be
 Remain a potential

Only fulfilled if he turns and returns
To restore himself to his coterie.

And what he perceives in the shapes of the clouds,
In the figures of water and light, are the shades of his past,
Shadows of other selves rising before him,
Leaning towards him
Unrecognisable, yet familiar,
Urging the anguish of far recall.

Shine falls hot from the sun, darkness rises
Out of the plum-dark waxen blue of the waves,

In CROWHURST with a lantern and two note-books

The moon and the stars spurt cool light; man should sleep,
But Crowhurst writes, possessed by a demon,
Burning his paraffin night after night.

- CROWHURST: The game with God is up and I resign.
- PORPOISE: Give up?! You told us you were doing fine.
- CROWHURST: Me doing fine? That's what they think at home.
- PORPOISE: You mean it isn't true? Explain how come.
- CROWHURST: Quite simple. In my hands you see two books.
- PORPOISE: Two hard-backed volumes, yes – logs by their looks.
- CROWHURST: Well, one's the genuine record of my trip..
- PORPOISE: Oh, oh, what is he going to let slip?!
- CROWHURST: Which shows I never left the South Atlantic.
- PORPOISE: The implications of it are gigantic...
- CROWHURST: The other log contains a false record.
- PORPOISE: You mean you're out to win the race by fraud!
- CROWHURST: No, no. That's something I am way beyond.
- PORPOISE: But what about the sponsors you'll have conned?
- CROWHURST: That used to worry me, but I've got over it.
- PORPOISE: But what about your wife, won't she discover it?
- CROWHURST: You mean that at one point I meant to cheat?
- PORPOISE: Or even that you gave up in defeat?

CROWHURST: My wife! My wife! If only she were here.

PORPOISE: Why, what could she do? Blow on the sail? or steer?

CROWHURST: How to redeem myself, to expiate my sin?
My game with God is over, and I have been left
Only the closing move to ponder upon,
The best way to leave things in order to make a new start.
I've witnessed the revelation, and know that
The choice is mine: to sink back into the mud
Of my body, continue making mistakes:
Or, leaving behind all human and earthly mistakes,
To fly to the Cosmic sphere – but how? By death.
O God be merciful? Will he be merciful?
Will he forgive me? Will he have mercy?
Which shall I throw overboard? The truth or my fraud?
The log of my voyage as it stands, or my fake?
Because if I hide the truth, I'll die as a hero,
Struck down by misfortune right in the hour of my victory.
At Teignmouth, Teignmouth with angry shores, they'll talk
Till closing time of the Crow, and how they were wrong,
Those sceptics and cynics, detractors pouring their scorn
Down the October wind as I was preparing.
My wife Clare will have her a husband at last that she's proud of,
And my children be able to respect my memory.
But what of the new revelation? Am I this feeble
To desire, after all I've been shown of the Cosmos,
Mere temporary posthumous fame that's based on a lie?
The...yes... great beauty of truth lifts me above it.
I'll throw my fraud to the waves, leaving the truth –
The log of what really happened – for the search parties.

CROWHURST throws one of his notebooks into the sea

My fraud! there it floats, revolving insanely.
At last I am free of it; waves kiss it, let them.
As soon they'll be kissing my body, but let them:
Soon I'll be free of my body as well.
The sea is the crucible where the ore
Of my spirit is purified; let it complete
Separation of brightness from dross
With its piercing intensity, let it engulf me.
The nature of my offence is revealed to me now
In a sphere far higher than human morality.
I broke the rules of the game I was playing with God.
Mercy!
I must arrange my cabin.
The time I have set for my exit is near.

Out CROWHURST taking the lantern and the remaining notebook

PORPOISE: The cheat is never a winner
 In the game he plays with his omniscient god.
 His own soul brands him sinner
 Wielding conscience's searing iron rod.

 Truth is entirely unbending
 And has never been party to compromise,
 A fact anyone intending
 To barter with truth would do well to realise.

 Truth has caught up with this man in his heart.
 The question is: what is he going to do?
 That he won't go through with his fraud seems certain.
 Without this alternative that leaves two:
 Either he'll radio home, confess,
 Sail back in ignominy, shame,
 The butt of all Teignmouth, bad boy of the press,
 Achieving notoriety for fame,
 But at least with the chance of another start –
 Or else he can bring down the final curtain.

In CROWHURST carrying his notebook and a chronometer which is broken

CROWHURST: You Cosmic beings, you've played it dirty with me.
 Perpetrated, yes, the one sin Nature allows you,
 The terrible sin of concealment. You kept Truth hidden
 For so long out of my sight. But I forgive you.
 I've realised at last your purpose in scheming this torment:
 So you could forge out of me the shining new instrument
 You see before you: the freshly created god-head.
 Without all your torture my soul would have been no more
 Than an impulse lost in the brain of a monkey
 Tinkering with a computer. You want me to be
 More aware of the Cosmic existence than you were,
 The first generation. I come bringing progress.

PORPOISE: So much for progress as far as your boat's concerned!

CROWHURST: Ignorant pestering porpoises! Keep your snouts out of this!

CROWHURST kicks out at PORPOISE

CROWHURST: The time is approaching at which I shall pass far beyond you.

PORPOISE: The madness of the timeless sea
 Bites deep in him.

CROWHURST fiddles with his broken chronometer

CROWHURST: I set out to play by God's rules
 But the devil has tricked me at every turning
 Until I find myself playing
 God's game with the devil's rules,

Pestered perpetually
By pods of impertinent porpoise schools.

PORPOISE: Unfortunate man
We pity your lot
But think you still can
Untangle this knot.
Return to your wife,
Confess you're a cheat:
In all this life
There's no greater feat.
Most men deceive
Someone or other,
Few though achieve
The strength to smother
Shame by confession
Of all they have been,
Open admission
Of something obscene.

CROWHURST: Once more you have failed to understand me.
My revelation –
The brilliant hour to which stress was pointing –
Has made all thought of return impossible.
To go on awaiting the spirit's release here –
That would be utterly anguished and meaningless.
Having seen whither life points, how can I stay
Feeling my body decay? How can I linger?
Currents of the Universe call to me:
I'm about to be launched by myself
Down that tunnel
Where space and time are as closely involved
As sand and cement in a concrete mixer.
I'm about to enter the Cosmic Mind.

PORPOISE: What are you doing up there now on deck?

CROWHURST: Giving the equipment one last double check.

PORPOISE: You mean to go on sailing after all?

CROWHURST: I want the boat to cope with wave and squall.

PORPOISE: You're going home? You'll face the northern seas?

CROWHURST: All will become apparent by degrees.

PORPOISE: You're off to tell the world what you've committed.

CROWHURST: The world shall know as much as I've admitted.

PORPOISE: Why cut the safety line that trails you aft?

CROWHURST: Well, for a start it's slowing down my craft.

PORPOISE: You're out to get home quick and prove her speed?

CROWHURST: I'll travel quick enough when I proceed.

Have mercy, if my offence is pardonable.
Have mercy, IT IS THE MERCY.

Out CROWHURST, having placed his notebook safely on deck, but taking the chronometer

PORPOISE: He's walked overboard
 Taking his broken chronometer.
 Time has run out for him.
 The boat sails on like a ghost
 Too fast to swim for.
 The sea receives him
 And all his struggles and changes of mind.
 The green waves take him,
 Holding him calmly
 As if they were lulling a baby who cries.
 The ocean's meadows,
 Gleaming with petals of light,
 Close him over,
 Cool long blades
 That whisper and wave
 Cover him.

So ends the voyage of the lone yachtsman.
There are many strange occurrences
And many inexplicable creatures in life.
What we say or do often has little effect
But duty and sympathy require it.

THE END