

The Tale of Eroh and Clair

A Speculative Exercise in Empathy

by

Christine M. Johnson

2005



Eroh was pumpin' with his posse, but his mind was somewhere else. They were beatin' tail to the flats, with some notion of nosing for flounder and, more to the point, a possible meet-up, but Eroh found he had little interest in the prospect. Sure enough, when they arrived, there were several other dolphins on the flats, including the Keno dyad and a couple of cute tri-slits. Eroh's triad chorused their whistle – "Eeueee!" - as they approached, and Keeu and Noii, as one, turned beam at them and humped their peduncles in typical pubescent bluster. The Dyad was about a year older than the Triad, but they were still lingering in the home pod, and encounters could mean trouble, especially when there were females around. But before anything overt could develop, Aiu slid in, paralleled, and jostled Noii with just enough wriggle to persuade them all they were only out to have fun. For the moment, at least, the tension was diffused.

As always, you had to admire Aiu – he always seemed to choose the right moves. Eroh couldn't remember a time when his best friend wasn't there to charm, flirt, or parley their way out of trouble, and sometimes into it. Aiu, Eroh and Turk were age-mates and had played together nearly every day since they were calves. There seemed no doubt in anyone's mind that they would form a permanent coalition, and the fact that the young trio already had a group whistle only reinforced that idea. But, although he'd never leaked a bubble of it, Eroh himself was beginning to wonder if their future together was as certain as it had seemed.

Still, for the present, Eroh kept up with his squad: fast-turn formations that took a taut concentration on the ultrabody. Especially with the girls watching, nobody wanted to be caught out, stretching it with a lag. For their part, the females only pretended to be headed away, their eyes pooched out and swiveled so far back that the guys would later call them 'hammerheads'. After a ruckus at the surface, the fivesome suddenly dove straight past the pre-babies, whistles shrilling and more than a couple of penises wabbling in the vortices. They startled a cow nearby, whose head was buried deep in the sand, buzzing for razor fish, and when she jerked up, empty-jawed, they all knew they were in trouble. She jaw-clapped, hard, then seared through the nearest, who happened to be Eroh, with a beam like an urchin's spine. She no doubt could have caught them and even given one or two a good whack, but she wouldn't stray far from her calf, who was gooning-about nearby, and the adolescents, males and females together, vanished in the murk.

Unsettled by the drilling he'd received, and more than a little irritated with himself for getting caught up in showing off, Eroh swam a little apart from the others. Jostling with braggadocio and nubile slipperiness, they hardly noticed, until he suddenly veered and dove. Hearing the intensity of his echolocation, the group was intrigued and, as a body, followed, buzzing the seafloor themselves. Once they identified the object of his scrutiny, however, their mood shifted to impatience. 'Its just another hunk of coagulated boat shit', Noii grumbled, his image of a metal fecal trail dangling from the rear of a hull making the two girls squeal in giddy disgust. But Eroh was fascinated. Whatever it was, he'd never heard one before, although he was sure that Noii was right, in a way – the thing was distinctly human.

Tweet's voice shimmied with revulsion as she iterated "Hull dangle – yeeuuuuk!". She came to a full halt, opened wide her jaws, and gagged.

Weeweeweewe chimed in, swerving, her pecs awiggle. 'And all scuttled-across' she shrilled, 'by those horrid Split-Tail parasites!'

Eroh let go a big bubble of exasperation at the idiocy of the Split-Tail stereotype – human as mermaid: dolphin head, torso, and fins, human legs and feet. Wee's image - no surprise - had it horizontal, while clearly real humans moved about upright. And the ignorant 'parasite'...! He found himself imagining more than one itchy sucker-fish crawling along Wee's flanks. But then he felt bad. It wasn't her fault she was so small-minded. She'd been raised, like so many he knew, to believe that the boats brought the people, not the other way around.

'The Split-Tail' he grumbled, 'is a mythical beast' and he dove again toward the thing. Eroh's mermaid had been a cross of the tinniness of hearsay, the robustness of the archetype, and the tweak of sarcasm. His zoom was tight enough to preserve a head, bent at an impossible ninety degrees, clacking its jaws.

Aiu was impressed with his friend's mythological labors, but doubted that the tri-slits shared his appreciation. He swiveled toward them and, with his usual flair, broadcast a dazzling, dynamic image, zoomed-in to

where the mermaid's pecs should be, and in their place, the articulated arms of a crab. The crooked limbs, at first, had resonant exoskeletons, but these Aiu soon tightened down into lines of bone, buried deep in the sonic blur of flesh, retaining only the snapping claws. The nymphs gave just the reaction he was after, squealing freely, but Eroh, he saw, was something less than pleased. He quickly slipped over, Turk as ever at his side, and engaged his good friend in a mock fight, which he soon let him win. Eroh was grateful, as much for the attention as anything, but he still felt that the remainder of the company left something to be desired.

Clearly, they felt the same way about him. 'Why don't you just take your coagulation', blatted Noii, 'and haul it back up to your beloved parasites?' His image of Eroh, trailing something vaguely metallic, miniaturized penis pulsing, powered straight up and disappeared across the simulated surface. Seconds cycled by, and when it became clear that Noii had no intention of finishing the image with the customary splash of re-entry, the girls burst into derisive delight.

Somewhat to Eroh's surprise, Turk barreled over to Noii and mounted him briefly, his massive bulk an intimidation. Although Keeu came close, Aiu did too, and wisely Noii submitted. Then Turk turned it back into a game. 'You farting at the breakout?!' he challenged, as if it were the very air that had been ridiculed, his belly-up image of Noii emitting a huge, reflectant sphere. 'Let's see how long you can go without hittin' it for air!'

Though he'd never admit it, Noii's jibe had rang a secret fantasy of Turk's – the burly dolphin had always wished he could fly. Plus, the Triad had been slighted, even if Eroh *had* kind of been asking for it, and Turk was frankly glad for any excuse to take on the obnoxious Keno. Accepting his dare, the three dove and zoomed off, great blows of air wantonly wasted, in the latest of an endless series of breath-holding heats.

Aiu stayed behind with Eroh and the girls. He was worried about his friend. The pre-babies were starting to look bored, and Aiu knew that Turk and the others would be returning soon, so he dove down to where Eroh was still probing the human junk. He buzzed it again, just to show an interest, but then buzzed the back of Eroh's head, a ritual they had for asking 'What's on your mind?' They floated up together and breathed in sync. Finally Eroh said 'You don't believe that Great Crabs drive the boats, do you?' Aiu let go a royal raspberry. 'That was just to keep the tri-slits happy!' he scoffed. (And nobody could slide an image of the undulating female form across your acoustic field like Aiu could.) 'As well you know, too!' he added, pointing his beam directly into Eroh's own. Eroh gave him a sheepish shove, and he got the rougher one of 'apology accepted' back. They settled abeam, locked eyes, and suddenly humped, pumped, and actually porpoised, a near-perfect unit looking for their third, whom they lucked out and spotted just surfacing not far away.

The threesome reappeared, Turk obviously the winner. As he slid in so his buds could both bump him, Keno crossed under, an impatience to be gone etched in their every move. 'Still stuck in the sand, I see' – Noii's snide image, head-down and buried to its tail, was pointed mainly at Aiu. Eroh leapt to his friend's defense, but said exactly the wrong thing. 'Aren't you even a little intrigued by the so-called "coagulation"?' - his level of focus starting out far and slow, but then accelerating vertiginously down to exquisite detail. Keno was not sucked in.

They turned as a unit, facing off the now-tight Triad, and simultaneously groaned: 'Sink 'em all!'

Aiu had just enough time to wonder why guys like Keno always did dead bodies so well, and Eroh was too appalled at the beam-blending effects - sinking mermen multiplied - that he hung there dumbstruck. Turk had no such problem. 'Sink you!' he squawked, and then all hell broke loose! They punctured and penetrated each other with bone rattling blasts and corkscrew whines, open jawed, and sparring with their beams. The girls started to trill, ratcheting things up another notch. Head to head, the guys spat epitaphs: 'Beach it, milk squirt!' 'Beach this!' And when they finally charged, more than one on either side emerged with rake marks that would last for years.

Keno faced Eueee again, from slightly farther away this time. The girls were closer to the Dyad, and it made them bold. 'I know what Eroh's after,' Keeu mocked, divisively, 'he wants to split the tail himself!' His vulgar image, starting at the central notch of the flukes and ripping its way forward, was too much for the girls, and the petite Tweet gave Keeu a whack to the head with her tail that left him stunned. Just long enough, at least, for the girls to jump together like magnets, and speed away. Keno soon sped after, and Aiu and Turk followed, chorusing wildly.

Their flight was deranged, however, when they noticed Eroh was not along side. They turned to him, disconcerted, and realized that he had made a choice. It hit them both, hard, but they were too hepped up to stop and think what it meant. They eyed each other, pupils flaring, and turned to resume the chase. Eroh rose and took a breath, then once more dove to the enigma half-buried in the sand.



Clair sat at the end of the pier, journal open, pen in hand, but her eyes as usual roved just short of the horizon, scanning for fins. She would be out on the boat in the morning, but she was stuck on land for the rest of today and it made her restless. “They’re out there *behaving*, and I’m here missing it!” she fumed to herself, not unaware that her use of the generic made the research sound like little more than an excuse for getting out with the d’s – which, indeed, it was. In all her life, she had loved nothing more than the moments she had gotten to spend in the water with dolphins. She’d read plenty – about echolocation, aquatic adaptations, brain architecture, on and on – but nothing had prepared her for the compelling reality of wet bodies in the sea. Sapient-seeming creatures, powerfully muscled, watching back with an evaluating eye, exuberant, lithe, curious, playful, with a quality that scientists were not supposed to mention – something to do with... charisma? Her own curiosity was keen, and it was this, in the main, that made the research more than an alibi. She wanted to know, *needed* to know, who these animals were. And she was only going to find that out, she knew, up close. “Ho!” she gasped, grabbing for her binocs, not letting her eyes leave the water. “Was that a fin!?”



Eroh liked to tow. His family and friends told him he overdid it, but he couldn’t help himself. He wasn’t completely unique; there was a female in the school, Toowee’e, who often kept something trailing from her fin. But Eroh knew that her motives were different from his own. She was forever drawing attention to herself, all aflutter with the space she occupied, always a little more wiggle and flash than was called for in a situation. For Eroh it was something else. Everybody went through a carrying phase, along with the occasional flourish or fad, but for Eroh it was something more. At first, he had simply fallen in love with the sweet passivity of the object, its utter surrender to the turbulence and shove of his fleet cut through the water. But, over time, the parade of tugs on his flukes and his fins had connected him to a larger world, and he was hooked. He’d managed to tow all manner of flora and flotsam, on his pecs, his penis, his tail, each with its peculiar slip-stream dance, each a lesson in subtle hydrodynamics. He doubted that anyone noticed, but he’d set a challenge for himself, in recent years, to never tow the same thing twice. As a result, he probably knew more about maneuvering with objects than the rest of the school combined.

His mother was embarrassed by it; she wouldn’t synchronize with him while he was towing. And his cohorts teased him mercilessly; any towing *they* did was in mockery of his. The others just thought him strange, obsessed with something so inconsequential. But Eroh knew that most of what he had carried had never grown or swam, and thus the practice served as a reminder that there were other ways to be, other worlds and creatures in them, that did not adhere to dolphin dogma of what was of consequence. It gave him a sort of distance from himself, and his kind, that was at once humbling and thrilling, feeling smaller, but all the braver for it. It was just as well, he thought, that the school didn’t know how he felt. Surely a pretentious clown was more ridiculous, even, than an oddball one. And indeed, no one cared when, embarrassed for once, he let his current trinket slip away. No one but Eroh himself.



Clair’s Journal – July 14

Landlocked today – no d’s. Just lots of deceptive whitecaps. Leaves me with nothing but time to muse on what it must be to be them...

Consider the hand – or rather, who we would be without it. So much of our mind is unmade by this omission! What would happen to get? take? have? How could we make? What would we use? How would we think without grasping? What would tangible be? So many metaphors lost to us – grope, grapple, hand out, handle, handful, hand over, hold... Humans, the caching primate – defined by our collections, setting things out and putting them away. Things we learn, with and from each other, and sometimes by chance, to wield, clutch, transfer, tweak, keep hidden, and display. Busy, manipulative fingers, imprinting themselves on the world. And how human could we ever be, if we were unable to mark?

Whatever their sins and virtues, dolphins do none of these. The only objects of consequence in their world are animate and, thus, under their own motive control. They stroke, rake, paddle, and glide over one another’s

bodies, but have no physical means of holding on to, or holding back, each other. They don't feed hand-to-mouth, or even chew; the fish are suctioned whole, sliding from outside to in. And whatever strands of kelp they may occasionally dangle, playing with the oddity of "bringing it along", they never grip but only balance, counterpoised and moving or its gone. Granted, with human enculturation they can come to clamp things in their jaws to prod and poke. And an occasional wild genius may break from its species' mold to mouth a serendipitous tool. But owning, and making, will remain forever alien to them. And what can be marked undersea?

Theirs is a different kind of dexterity, feeling and provoking the details of their world with sound.



Eroh was tired. The school had corralled a great shimmer of herring, and everyone had made several passes through, until all had had their fill. After the babble and rub that always followed a successful hunt, the assembly had gradually quieted, and many went tardigrade. Eroh hadn't seen Aiu and Turk since they'd taken off after Keno, so he settled in near his mother and sister, grateful for the forgetfulness of Herd. It felt good to be home, the school at rest around him. He let a little whistle go - thin trail of sparkle - as his right side shut down, eyelid dropping, right pec wobbling in the flow. His left side's access widened out to take in the whole of his surroundings, yielding its focus, and carrying him forward with the slightest undulation of his tail.

In no time they were One.



Clair's Journal – July 15, 2AM

I had a *flying dream!!!* What a treasure! No other such pleasure - where merely to will is to go... Gently elated by the peril implied, the thrill of the fall and the ecstasy of nonetheless not... Slow, graceful, swoop after swoop, access to all, in contact with none, resistance rendered unnecessary, suspended and underway! There's a lucid quality, too, to such dreams, a larger point of view, startled into sentience by the flagrant violation, but dampened lest you lose it to awake...

How can dolphins *survive* without dreaming? In every other mammal, except the bizarrely primitive echidna, REM sleep is essential. When deprived, we become irritable, jumpy, hallucinatory, and die! With such stakes for the brain, pampered and expensive organ that it is, how could Nature take such an abrupt turn and allow cetaceans to do without? Their dwarfed corpus callosum, the culled set of cables connecting the two halves of their brain, can help account for uni-hemispheric sleep, but how do they compensate for the need that is served by the marvels of REM in the rest of us?



Eroh had managed to rock through one unimind cycle, but soon found he couldn't keep either of his own sides asleep. He was always so disoriented coming out of hemi-doze. His thoughts, what little he could remember, seemed distant, disjointed and bizarre, although often compelling. It was as though there was something he was trying or needing to do, but by the time he'd wrested executive control back from the school at large, the need had gone. The echo of it left him unsettled, however, and he quietly broke from the school. He headed away and, after a while, could no longer hear the others; it was only then that he finally felt at ease. Even Eroh had little idea how very un-dolphinlike he was.

After a little down-current meandering, he let himself come to a float, lolled over on his side, and broke one eye into the air. The beyond was black, and he stared at the Bright, as he had on so many nights, wondering what it could mean to be without sound. Did the Bright make a sound that he just couldn't hear? Did it have a face his eyes

couldn't see? He knew, in that way that all dolphins knew, that the night-Bright rocked the sea - but beyond that, no one else seemed to care. Granted, the Bright was hard to talk about – how do you sonic such an event? No substance, no impact on the medium - just light, a piercing hole of it, moving across the sky. Even Aiu, who could find a way to talk about anything, usually resorted to a shrill, ultra-tight beam in a deadened field, an image of the sort that dolphins tended to link with intense scrutiny. Was it a kind of eye? Eroh wondered. One that saw without the power of sound? He shuddered a bit at the thought and rolled upright to breathe. Maybe it only saw above the water, he mused, noticing how the surface fractured the sphere. Strange barrier, that surface - frangible yet absolute, with its shrunken panoramic of the hemispheric sky. Why should insubstantial light penetrate so well, when substantive sound gets ricocheted away? So many mysteries! And he wanted, *needed* to know – answers, he feared, no dolphin could ever give him.

Human were creatures of the air – could they?



Clair's Journal – July 15

Dawn. No point in pretending to sleep any longer. Not due at the dock til 7, so I'm out on the deck, watching the sea from afar. I can hear it from here! On a misty purple morning like this one, sound travels well. So beautiful, the sea, a mostly-full moon lolling over its depths...

The thing about dolphins is, they live in a world of sound. A great pool of it, created by themselves, each other, and the shape, place and content of their fluid reality. In echolocation, they send out high-speed click trains, brief bursts of intense, mostly ultrasonic noise, in rapid succession, and then wait to hear how long it takes for which frequencies to return. Echos from objects father away take longer to make their way back, while wavelengths much bigger than their targets, (say, a tasty macarel) just sweep over it and continue on away. It is those just matched to the target's shape and size that return to the listening dolphin. These echoes, traveling nearly five times the speed they would in air, slide up along channels of fat in the dolphin's lower jaw and get dumped into its inner ear. Somehow, in that massive brain of theirs, a comparison is presumably made to the outgoing signal, and the difference results in a sonic image of all the surrounding objects. And not just of their surface form; in this 3D sonogram, the dolphins get a different set of echoes from the seawater-like flesh, the harder resonant bones, and the highly reflective inner chambers of air. How bizarre to peer right into your friends, family, and food!

A much more sensuous sense than vision, sound is more like touch. The dolphins literally *feel* their way through the sea. In fact, they can pack quite a whollop - a single concussive pop, loud enough to do tissue damage, called the "Big Bang". I remember getting hit by it once - and it was no fun! On the other hand, they can also "Tickle Buzz" - pointing that penetrating, high-pitched palpitation at all the right places. Anyone who talks about the animals buzzing one another in this way as a case of merely "inspecting" each other, clearly has never actually been in the water while its happening.

The sounds the dolphins make come out of their forehead, focused by a waxy lens of fat, and reflected away from ringing their own bulbous skulls by curved, rear mirrors of air. It is nestled in those nasal passages that one finds the source of this magnificent noise. "Musseu du Songe" - the "monkey's muzzle" - ironic name for a very un-primate-like organ. Two, tight little plugs, whose staccato shudder, on a millisecond scale, is driven by plosive bursts of air popping their covetous seals. Recycled from air sac to air sac, the same supply can be squeezed again and again across these agitated barricades - slow enough to be heard by human ears as a distinctive series of tocks, or so fast that the series just blurs into a whine.

But these pulsive trains are not the only sounds the dolphins make. They can also eek open a tiny channel and a siphon pure-tone whistle across the vent. Sometimes such whistles escape into bubble trails, but other times the air is reused, and the whistles trill on and on. In fact, bilateral creatures that they are, the dolphins can actually whistle on one side their heads and click on the other. Or even put out different patterns of clicks from either side, creating complex "burst pulse" sounds that we tend to lump together as "squeals", "squawks", or "screams". Slow them down to a speed we can handle, with our air- accustomed ears, and these "social sounds" show a rich harmonic structure and complicated modulations that hint at meanings well beyond our ken.

Do dolphin sounds "mean"? Whistles, we know, include signature calls that distinguish individuals, coalitions, or schools, and states we call excitement or distress. But what about the complicated "burst pulse" sounds? Could two outgoing beams interact in such a way as to create a kind of mimic of an echo? When you

perceive and speak in the same modality, why would you ever create a language of arbitrary sounds that substitute for and evoke mainly visual images? You wouldn't! But you just might, if you could, develop a lexicon of analogue, sonic imagery - a language of moving pictures made out of sound...



Eroh was thinking of his brother. It floated an emptiness through him that he feared might fill him up. He did not understand death. How could *anything* just -- stop? Perhaps it was largely a matter of being a dolphin alone, but Eroh was troubled, brooding over the appalling transition from animate to inanimate, and spooked by a malevolence he fought hard to disbelieve. Lately, his loneliness had gotten all tangled with wanting to be alone, and he started violently at Aiu's sudden whistle. A moment later, he knew why his heart had sunk. Aiu's use of his own call meant he'd chosen not to use the Triad's. Eroh's foreboding deepened.

'So, Thing-Boy' Turk started right in, 'how did it feel to be left behind?!' His sonic was crude but effective, the turbulence of retreating flukes rolling Eroh along his central axis, spinning him faster and faster, his dangled strip of metal now tightening around his chest. It was actually quite eloquent for Turk, but with no one but the Triad around, he held nothing back. Separation was the state he dreaded most, and he wanted to be sure that Eroh never provoked it again. Ever ready to top an image, Aiu picked up the spinning Eroh motif, and expanded the metal strip until it finally encased his friend's entire body. Somehow he managed to infuse the metal's clang with a melancholy that showed his true feelings about Eroh's armor.

Eroh didn't mean to be putting up barriers. In fact, he couldn't understand how his friends could not plainly hear what was happening with him! After all, he knew *them* better than he knew himself. He'd spent a lifetime buzzing them, from every angle, until he knew them inside out -- the sonic sheen off the curve and coil of their air sacs, the thrum of their bones, even the rhythm of their hearts. Eroh moved into his slot in the chevron on Aiu's left, and tried to find the group pulse. Since Aiu didn't resist, Turk moved into his own slot on the right, and the three moved together in silence.

But soon Eroh drifted back, and Turk, spotting a piscine glint, took off in pursuit of a snack. Eroh listened as he zeroed in, the whine spinning high and tight then ending abruptly, the big guy's incessant appetite momentarily assuaged. Eroh was struck, as always, by the raw power and simple passions of his monosyllabic friend: Hunter, snatching life from the world to grow stronger; Protector, offering his own, for any loyal friend. In spite of the tension, Eroh felt a surge of fondness for his cousin -- his mother's sister's son -- with his huge melon, his need to fly, and his utter disregard for danger. He thought of his goofy turtle dance, haplessly paddling in circles, and of how he seemed to have no sense of touch in his massive dorsal fin. More than once Eroh had managed to silently maneuver into Turk's overhead-and-aft blind spot, and drape a bit of seaweed across his fin, without his ever knowing. Together for as long as either could remember, the two cousins, so different yet so one, had found their perfect third in Aiu.

Eroh caught apace with Aiu, though a bit wide, and ached at the determined cadence of his friend, whom he knew was headed nowhere in particular. Aiu was his hero, his playmate, his confidant. Born of an intriguing, brilliant, immigrant female, who was popular even with their moms, Aiu had always stood out as something special. And for some reason, obscure as the sea after storms, Aiu had chosen Eroh for his friend. The three of them struck such a perfect balance -- no one could ask for better companions on a Quest.

The Quest. Therein lay the problem. Young males their age typically went off for a year, sometimes two, ranging far from the school, proving themselves against the world, before they returned to take their place in society. The Triad had talked of little else of late -- or rather, Aiu and Turk had. It was Eroh's growing silence on the subject that had led them to the uneasy waters through which they now swam.

But even Aiu, the placator, master of smooth running, finally realized that the time for confrontation had come. He struck off at an orthogonal angle, and then swiveled, and the three formed a head-on triangle. 'Even when you're here, you're not really here' he said at last, his image of Eroh morphing into a vaguely dolphin-shaped jellyfish, little more than a blur, a shadow in the sonic field. It did not escape Eroh's notice that even Aiu had included the faint jangle of an object, trailing from the transparent tail.

Eroh sank at the gravity of the moment, but did not know how to explain. How could he put into sonics the complex, mystifying feelings that rolled through him, drowning out all else? Or how, despite their many origins, they were, all of them, made out of need, and all seemed to push him in the same, inland direction.

His speechlessness was enough. They all three knew what he was thinking. And in that moment Eroh realized that if he was ever going to convince his friends to join him, now was the time.

‘But what if’ he said, as if the argument had already been raging ‘we could actually TALK with one of them?!’

“Paww!” Turk chuffed, and turned away in disgust. More on the damn mermen!

Eroh was desperate. “Aiuuu!” he pleaded, the rare use of another’s whistle to his face adding a poignancy that made even Turk turn around. He wished he could make a sound they’d never heard before, shock them into listening for something utterly new. Instead, he settled on a hunting metaphor. ‘The possibilities are more than we could herd!’ he entreated. The glitter and chime of the roiling prey, such bounty as dwarfed the encircling Triad, had a faintly metallic ring. Food for thought. ‘Just imagine what we might learn!’ His shift from haphazard clicks, muddying their own waters, to the pure clarity of synchronized beams quickened Aiu’s heart. ‘We CAN’T imagine!’ Eroh hurried on, sensing he had a chance, his simulated outgoing beam stopping abruptly as if swallowed by the mystery that was Human. ‘Not every Quest needs to go beyond’ he added, finally figuring it out. ‘Some can take you within...’ When Eroh managed to tune his voice to just that interference pattern that gave the illusion that his beam was traveling into, rather than out of, his forehead, Aiu was so moved, he mimicked it.

But Turk didn’t understand, not at all. ‘What about the *Deep*?!’ he roared. Did Eroh seriously think those puny humans had anything to offer as profound as the oceans of the world?! And here they were, wasting time in endless talk, when it was all right there waiting, theirs to gulp and swallow! They were of age – why weren’t they gone already! All because of Eroh’s stupid obsession...

Aiu knew trouble when he heard it. ‘Cast a beam at it, Eroh!’ he urged. ‘The *Deep*! Wide open in all directions! Currents faster than you can swim! A vast biomass rising up to feed you!’

‘Sharks that can sub-divide you!’ inserted Turk, as if he couldn’t wait, his shark’s jaws stretching half its length, snapping a dolphin in two.

‘The whales of legend!’ Aiu thrummed, reasserting control. Now he was the one aiming for Eroh’s heart. ‘The Great Baleen, twelve dolphins long! The fearsome Black and Whites, flinging seals like they were salmon! The noble Great Toothed, its gigantic forehead rumbling with a sound so deep and so loud, it is heard to the ends of the ocean!’

None of them had personally ensonified any of the mighty cetaceans, but all had heard the tales. The sonics were familiar to every dolphin: the giant, arching upper jaw, hung with frayed baleen, trapping particulate life; the abrupt LOUD/soft/LOUD that mapped onto the Orcas’s radical pigmentation; the great lopsided bowl of a skull that hoisted the Sperm Whale’s thick and thunderous melon. Even inventive Aiu revered such icons, and Eroh, too, was not immune to their draw. In fact, at mention of the Great Toothed Whale, Eroh actually bobbed the rhythm of their ride. The greatest mind in the sea! To someday meet and attempt to speak with such a being -- he’d dreamt of it since the earliest days of his uncertainty. If any cetacean had the answers...

‘And no land!’ Turk proclaimed, as if this held allure above all. The vastness of Turk’s deep and slowing tocks, undisturbed by any returning echo, made Eroh reel.

‘No contact’ Aiu agreed, ‘none but each other--’

The brotherhood, the Triad – that’s what mattered! But rather than bring strength and comfort, the thought made Eroh panic. They were love! They were his! The Sacred Obligation! How could he even think of living without them? What kind of creature was he?! He felt crazed, trapped, his chest constricting, collapsing down to a rock so hot he could only leap to get free of it! He flung his body as far out of the water as he could, and arched as he hit for maximum internal percussion. The others caught the pace immediately and dashed and darted, bold arcs out, or flukes whacking the surface. They were a commotion at high speed, blasting their whistles, their bubblestreams scrambled in the froth. Finally exhausted, Eroh slammed into the brine and let it all go adrift, blankly watching the surface-shatter subside. Sinking in seeming slow motion, he spotted the moon. It left him no choice.

‘I can’t turn away from them’ he said. ‘The mystery is too deep.’ This time the vertiginous vortex he had used in vain with Keno became a kind of Shepard’s spiral, continuously focusing down, but ever renewed, afar, to focus again.

In spite of himself, in the face of such eloquence, Aiu was intrigued. Sensing this, Turk, for the first time, started to worry. He pulled around to face the others beam on. He waited a moment, and then he thundered: “Boooom!”

There was something about the way Turk’s head was shaped that had always admitted him access to the deeper tones. He could put more power at the lower registers than any dolphin they knew, so only he could come anywhere near an true evocation of the renowned Great Noise. No dolphin really knew what the Great Noise was, but most were certain that it came from the domain of the humans, and all were certain that it bade not well. Turk was reminding them of how far things with humans could go.

But Eroh could not condemn the entire species. ‘They saved my sister!’ he cried, hands and feet in the surf, turning her around, sending her back, despite her screams, leaving their other sibling behind, swimming to life.

Aiu, already hopeless, turned to Turk. ‘His sister...’ he submitted, asking more for forgiveness for than agreement with their troubled Triad-mate. But by now Turk was afraid. ‘They didn’t do your *brother* much good’ he croaked, a blatant betrayal. The inertness of the body, only half submerged, was more than Eroh could bear.

“**POCK!**” Two hundred and twenty decibels, a sound it took your whole body to make, one that could stop a dolphin in its wake, rattling its bones, all trapped waters crosshatched. Hit with it dead-on, it maxed out your hearing with a pain that popped your skull. Not a sound that you’d want pointed at anyone you loved.

The bond was broken.

Turk charged and Eroh came to his senses. But not soon enough, as the larger animal tore through blubber to flesh.

“NO!” Aiu cried, driving between them. But suddenly the squall had passed. Turk was swimming one way, and Eroh the other. Aiu’s plaintive “Eueeee!” pulled taut at both their hearts, but they kept on going.

‘Our Seeker!’ moaned Aiu, knowing life would never be the same. ‘Your unquenched curiosity kept us to a common truth’ he thought after Eroh. But then he turned and followed Turk into the Deep.



Clair, Davey and Ken were stoked, the glint in every smile from their shared disbelief at the brazen good luck of their lives. Passionate, serious, and having no end of fun - out on the boat at last! At ease with one another, each would follow their own routine, concordant routes through joint execution, tending to the sub-tasks that constituted putting to sea. While they heaved and grunted they prattled and laughed, checking the surface and the sky, eager to be gone.

“We need to head the other way” said Clair, “*away* from the military base”.

“But the islands to the south are covered with commercial marinas – we’d have to go way around them” argued Davey. “We’d use up half our fuel just getting there.”

“But, if we do end up getting good access” Ken rejoined, “maybe we could just move base to the islands, and start out that much closer!”

“Good access” resounded in all three minds, and again they smiled that smile. Soon the boat was beating against the swells.

Great visibility, practically flat, with nary a whitecap. Clair liked to hang at the bow, scanning, ever scanning, but also blasted by blue on blue, spackled with salt and grinning without provocation. They’d been driving against the spray for almost four hours before the call went up - “Yeeehah!” Ken scrambled to join her, while Davey craned from the bridge. “Snuck up out of nowhere!” Ken exclaimed, as he squeezed in beside her and, like her, leaned over to see. Four glistening hulks, streamlined and sluiced in speed, head-on and jockeying in the torrent of resistance the ocean put up to the keel, surfing the surge off the bow like the experts they were. Bubble trails streaming, they dosie-doeed, each sudden break for a gasp of air thumping the hearts of the humans that watched from above. The thrill was contagious!

Clair looked up and spotted another fin, ahead and to starboard. A lone dolphin streaked in and joined the hurtle at the bow. Clair raised five fingers in triumph, and Davey obliged them all with continued speed. But then the foursome veered away and Clair’s fingers closed, but one. Odd, she thought, a solitary dolphin, and was further surprised as he continued to ride, and then broke off in a different direction than the others had gone. Davey had tried to keep track of the four, but splayed his hands to the crew to show he’d lost them. The solitary dolphin had lingered, however, and even when Davey brought the boat to a stop, the fin remained nearby. Clair hurried to get into her gear.



Still surfacing at shortened intervals, Eroh pulsed from the ride. Not quite as magical, he had to admit, as riding the wave of a whale, but, for sheer speed and nonstop, whole body drive, the boat could not be beat! Eroh cocked his head and watched the humans, moving about onboard. Who *were* these bizarre creatures?! How – and why – did they do the things they’d do? Like everyone, they came for the fish (Eroh didn’t believe for a second that it was the boats, not the people, in charge), or migrated by like whales, their comings and goings on schedules

unfathomable. Just that they lived out of the water was baffling enough. To a dolphin, the air afforded ephemeral immersion only, essential, recurrent, but hindered and, ultimately, hostile – the water was where one dwelled. But, clearly, not every one.

His own experiences with the aerial realm were tantalizing and strange. He'd leapt, of course, a thousand times, up into the weighted air, that suspended moment at the height of an arc pure exhilaration. He'd hauled-out on beaches, snapping at the flopping fish driven onto the rocks, daring the day-Bright to suck every living drop from the surface of his skin. He'd been thrilled at the risk and the appalling heaviness of his own body. Secretly terrified, like every beached whale, at his clumsy powerlessness - brought to a halt, pinned to the surface of the world. And still, he found himself seeking that vacant-seeming space. He loved to spy hop, pushing his head, naked into the pressing bright emptiness, leaving all sonic access behind, the only sounds – birds, boats, splashing dolphins – initiated by others. An alien world, one he could only view, but never feel.

He was fascinated by the fact that life could, nonetheless, thrive there. He watched the birds overhead, swimming in ethereal currents, and this, at least, he could almost understand. But when they dove into the water after fish, they seemed pushed back up to the surface, just as he felt pushed back into the water after a leap. What were these potent forces, returning creatures to their spheres? He wondered if - *SPLASH* ! Jolted, he bolted, but swerved and came slaloming back. There was a human in the water!!!



Their hearts pounding, the two creatures took each other in. The dolphin probed with an intense beam of sound; the human's eyes were wide. Both exhilarated, and a little scared, they marveled at one another's strangeness, and at the undeniable sense each had, that, however strange, there was something they could recognize, something like themselves, intriguing and of consequence, evident in the other. This was going to be *FUN!*

The dolphin circled, left face to the human, who frantically paddled in place, pivoting as fast as she could to keep eyes to eye. Faster and faster the dolphin swam, 'til the spinning top of a woman toppled, breaking the link, and sending the dolphin, in giddy triumph, whilly-wagging away. He breathed and dove, and so did she and this, too, evoked a spray of echolocation. A tube, as hollow as a kelp stem but stiffer, fed into her mouth, and from its upper end, a stream of bubbles rose, as sound, unintelligible to either party, emanated from her object-obstructed face. The dolphin let go a delirious whistle of his own, bubbles racing hers back up to into the air. Neither could really believe that this was happening!

The woman was the first to surface to breathe and the dolphin buzzed her as she rose. She never took her eyes off him and soon dove again, this time arms at her side, undulating from her head to elongated fins. This sent the dolphin into rapid, jagged circles; then he zoomed away. The human frog-kicked to the surface. The dolphin flew back to find out why she hadn't followed, and pulled up short when he discerned the rhythmic articulations of her appendages, propelling her noisily, with considerable foam, across the surface of the water. What an extraordinary creature, he thought; she was just relieved he'd come back. He made a new sound, unlike his investigative whines and over-wrought whistles, and although her reply was nothing like it, both somehow felt that contact had been made.

She dove again towards him, and this time he let her come. Up close, he could see that her eyes were visibly magnified, if acoustically obscured, behind a pocket of air encased in plastic. She also had a kind of dark elastic skin over the central part of her body, which the dolphin knew, from his internal examinations, was female. The woman checked and saw that he had the single, lower-abdominal slit that demarcated a male. Both their bodies flushed.

She rose and dove, and then he did the same. Coming down toward her he slowed, and then hung, head down, suspended, centering her in his only bifocal field, below his chin, flooding both sides of this brain with her visual image. She was awed by his size and total control in the medium, and by the slick, sleek thickness of his skin. She tentatively reached out a hand. Stunned by her boldness, he felt the pressure of it moving toward him, and let it come within an inch before he curved away. Then he had an idea.

He scanned the surroundings and sprinted off, returning shortly with a ragged piece of kelp hooked on his fin. 'Things! Yeah. Humans like things.' he thought to himself, probably jumping at a chance to show off more than he knew or'd admit. Anything to make her like him. He needn't have worried – she was completely in love! He waited while she took a breath and then he swam toward her. When the kelp aligned with her line of sight, he let it slide down his body, keeping it fixed in her reference frame 'til it slid off the end of his tail. Transfixed, she reached out and took it.

Then she had an idea. Using both hands, she stripped it into two pieces, held out one toward him and dropped it, and carried the other up and away. He'd ensouled the whole operation, and now it was his turn to be mesmerized. Then he made a dash to snag the piece she had left and leapt out in the air beside her. He took her breath away, and she ended up coughing water, and having to adjust her tube. He made plosive arcs around her, still towing the kelp, and then he dove, swiveled and angled toward her, to watch and wait. He realized with a jolt that her breathing tube let her keep her blowhole – which was, oddly, on the front of her face – underwater (so she could stare at him) and still have access to the air. Suddenly, he felt a little intimidated. Maybe there was more going on with these animals than even he had imagined!

She dove down and when he saw the kelp still in her hand, he remembered the one he dangled. So once again, needing her to see, he maneuvered his strand, slipping it from his pec and catching it on his tail. The woman let hers go as well, and then awkwardly struggled – her finned-foot arched at ninety degrees to her leg – to catch the wily fragment. It slipped away, but the dolphin had already come to a complete stop, as if dumbfounded. The woman swerved and grabbed the kelp and headed for the surface, and the dolphin did the same. This time, he did not make her dive; he stayed up near her and did his maneuver again, only on his right side. When the woman switched her piece to her right hand, and again did the drop and catch, this time maintaining it on her flipper, the dolphin let loose a bubble of such amazement that he felt he had emptied his lungs. Was she actually imitating him?! In that moment he realized he had never completely believed it before – for all his bluster over the denigration of Split-Tails. He needed to be sure...

She dove and he aligned with her, and wiggled his pecs. She bent her arms, held her wrists tight against her chest, and wiggled her hands. The intensity of his echolocation vibrated her very bones. Then he swung his head back and forth, and when she tried to do the same, they both ended up laughing and gulping for air. But he had heard enough. He was convinced. And he found the truth astounding! Humans really were intelligent! And as he rolled to stare into her eyes, the two of them both felt the bolt that locked them together. Sapience! She knew that she had been seen, and he'd seen her know it!

Suddenly, he knew what he must do. He arched away, then turned back one last time. He saw that she had taken the tube from her mouth and had draped the kelp between her jaws as she undulated toward him. He spun to find his piece, snagged it in his teeth, and went pumping past her fast, the seaweed gyrating in his eddies. From there he disappeared into the blue.



SAPIENT! The beam that points at itself! Eroh blasted across the swells, more aerial than not, his mind out-racing his flight. He had to find Eewah, tell her! She had to know! An alien intelligence – right within range! And it was really true! The human had mimicked him! Seen into him! They had been an Us! And all he knew right now was he wanted more...



“Oh My God! OH MY GOD! That was so incredible!!! Did you guys see that?! He even mimicked me there at the end!”

--- oh my god...!



If living near humans was to be his Quest, Eewah would have to know. Where could she be?! Truth was, he wanted to hear his friend's assurance he'd made the right decision. And he needed her sage advice. He wouldn't rest 'til he found her.

In great forward leaps, he scanned for fins, and finally saw a large group, far to the south. As he got closer, he bathed the group in a low, broad beam, enough to tell him that it was only females and calves. He was about to turn away, when he actually heard his own signature whistle coming from the midst of the group. Flushed with embarrassed anger, he felt compelled to announce himself, just as if nothing had happened. Silently fuming, he headed toward his mother, who was clearly waiting some little distance away. As much as he loved her, lately she drove him crazy! She tipped him a welcome when he drew near, and although it was meant as an atoning act of respect, it still reminded him, coming from her, of a mother's summons to suckle, and this too irked. She silenced her field for him to talk, but he no longer wanted to share what had been his irrepressible news.

She was so just so different from him! She hardly ever left the water, as if afraid that, exposed to air, she might just effloresce, her fluids leaching back into the sea and the remaining crystalline dust just blowing away. As soon as the image passed through his mind, he felt guilty. She did lose one son to the air, after all, and almost a daughter as well. But Eroh was facing his own challenge, now, and he knew just what she would say. She didn't want him to leave at all – some males didn't, as she'd often reminded him - but, if he must, she was relieved that at least he'd have Aiu's brains, and Turk's brawn, to protect him. If she'd any inkling of what he had in mind...

'You ought to say goodbye to your sister before you go', his mother intoned, the ought coming through as a deep, slow-motion roll, brotherly-chaste but prolonged, to his sister and his niece. Stunned, he was rapt as she replayed the image, each iteration farther and farther away. A great wave of sadness engulfed him. She moved in close and stroked him with her fin and, without thinking, he slipped back and down, gently bumping at her flank, wishing, for that moment, with all his heart, that he was a calf again. And then she surprised him for a second time. A slip of seaweed drifted by, and she nabbed it on her fin. When she was sure he had seen what she'd done, she slid it from her's to his. Eroh let go an exaltation, and slid her a full body rub, from the tip of his rostrum to the trailing edge of his fluke, jubilant and renewed.

He would never know how she knew, but her gesture of support buoyed his flight. After goosing his niece with a spurt of sound, to her piercing squeals of delight, and performing the solemn roll to his sister, Ooowee, he scooted ahead and chucked her chin with his tail. Ooowee, in a parody of retribution, scatter-gunned her mad little brother, but felt tugged by a wistful fondness toward his dopplering form. Once he was out of range, she dropped away from the other young moms, and went to her mother's side. As they huddled, isochronic, whetting their pecs in reciprocal reassurance, the calf tucked up tight between them, the last they heard was a high-pitched whistle, a perfect counterfeit of his mother's own.



Clair's Journal – July 15 9pm

What *is* it about dolphins?! I'm a rational person. I don't believe in ESP, or that the ancestral cetaceans landed from the Dog Star or fled the city of Atlantis. But I understand how such tales get told when people are entranced – as I am entranced. A 'close encounter' with the real thing and I'm completely agog! My intellect, my anxiety, even the business at hand all shifted to moot in his presence, alerted as to something more important. But what *is* that? What is this power they have to take our breath away? Why do I still, after all these years, tear up behind my sunglasses whenever they first appear? (Plus, hypocrite that I am, knowing what the free life means to them, I still make a guilty trip now and then to the sea park, merging in a stadium-sized gasp and cheer when dolphins but leap from the water!) Giddy and awed, we're all transported, and one on one is even better still. There's just so -- *somebody* there... Oh, I know, my dog is somebody too. As are my cats, my birds. But with dolphins, somehow, its different. More like us. Cerebral beasts, enthralled by their own existence. Living a life that they think matters, a life undertaken, holding themselves, and others, to the standards of the tribe. And while humans are, to them, at most, a curiosity, a competitor, a taint, their species has graced our art, inhabited our myths, and infiltrated our dreams for as long as we've been us. Beautiful, buoyant, momentum without mass, they're fantasy incarnate. Infantile yet powerful, potent but cute, a virile, naked mammal, its convincing smile graffitied by hydrodynamics, its real eye rolling to look into our own. For, finally, it's the reality, and not the fantasy, that moves us the most. Big, bold, inquisitive, playful, but not one to suffer fools, the dolphin, for all its cognizance, is living wild. That's what they alert us to – the compelling Here of Now.



Eroh was in unfamiliar waters. Their load of rust, oil, petroleum and sulfur gave them an unsavory tang. There had been much boat traffic here, the kind that didn't come for the fish. Eroh realized he'd entered what had always been forbidden territory, and its lure quickened his heart. Humans were definitely the dominant species here. He'd searched everywhere for Eewah, and knew that the elders sometimes ventured into these waters. And even though he was still moving away from the woman who was now his goal, he kept on going, thinking that perhaps he could learn something here to help him to better understand her.

Metal was becoming more prevalent. Objects of many sizes and shapes lay on or in the sand. Some had dropped only recently, others had long ago been claimed by the sea. Eroh was struck by how even the most recent, if they afforded it, were already occupied by the dart and huddle of size-appropriate denizens. Reef fish, crustaceans, eels, and octopi often moved right in, and coral and barnacles could eventually settle. The dolphins, even Eroh, had always assumed that the objects that fell from boats were simply refuse, but now, he wondered. Was it possible they were provided? Could such micro-habitats have been seeded by beneficent intent? He wanted to believe it was true, even if the objects themselves were likely toxic.

Suddenly, up from below - strangers! Their predatorial approach gave Eroh a primal jolt. Then he caught that they were dolphins – albeit hulking and strange – and he swerved and blurted his ID. His whistle was so ingenuous that it caught the others off-guard, and one of them actually whistled his own in return.

“Oooooooo...” -- a cold wind, hollow and deep, stretching out to nothing, the most haunted signature Eroh had ever heard. He stared at the huge, dark stranger – his surface battered and scarred, his pace a lope both driven and lost – wishing he could douse him with sound (an intimacy good manners would not, as yet, permit). Then without warning, the partner was perpendicular beside him.

“Ack!” the huge animal squawked, directly into Eroh's head. Eroh could effect no forward movement until his ringing skull grew still.

The next he knew, they had formed up a chevron around him, each below and on either side, and were cruising along as if they had known him for years.

‘We're a go’ whistled Ooooooo, in dialect that reminded him of Aiu's mom's. Just hearing it gave Eroh a pang. ‘We don't sound off so good like we used to, but we get by’ Ooooooo said. His classic sonic of the Dyad – doubled parallel heads – had a certain poignancy. Even though Ooooooo, unlike his cohort, could clearly whistle well, both of the dolphins in his image went from chorusing to silence, their ineffectual air continuing to stream, but dually mute. Eroh was moved. It took a disciplined adept to incorporate a whistle into a sonic (most, discussing a particular Dyad, just added it afterward) and the way Ooooooo had faded it out left Eroh feeling bereft. Who were these guys?!

He shifted his focus to the one called Ack and, as soon as he did, Ack sent a bizarre sonic across his auditory field. It was a flipper, lifelike in detail, bones, muscle, blubber, skin, solid but detached, tumbling slowly through watery space. Eroh tried to shy away from the extraordinary image, but Ooooooo held him wedged in the chevron. He surfaced, the Dyad tight behind him, and struggled to keep his head.

‘You gotta understand’ said Ooooooo, ‘we's just kids when we were taken’. As vivid and nuanced as his sonics may have been, Ooooooo's voice had a grating timbre, a shimmy of dissonance that put Eroh even more on edge. He was still trying to comprehend the image of two juveniles being closed in a net, when Ack blasted ‘*TANK!*’ and zoomed off. Ooooooo sprang after him, sync'ed tightly in breath and beat, and gradually brought him, calmer, back around. Eroh might have fled, though he doubted he'd have made it far, but he was too stunned by Ack's last image. In it, somehow, the seafloor, hard and unnaturally flat, turned at right angles to itself and rose, vertically, on every side, all the way up to the surface. It was a terrifying image, the dolphins inside trapped in a box of echoes.

‘He took it hard’ Ooooooo went on. ‘Rammed that wall more than once, even after he was sure it wouldn't break.’

Eroh actually listed a bit, as if his rudder was gone. Something in Ooooooo's image, graphic as it was, made him realize that it wasn't even the wall so much, as the not having a choice...

‘We're a go!’ Ooooooo insisted. ‘We were moved to the pens soon after’. The walls dissolved to a shadowy lattice of fishnet, where sound, at least, was always free to pass.

Ack, who had seemed to zone out for a bit, came back and chuffed at this, then groaned an image of dead cold, deep inside.

‘Ok, ok, so the fish were dead’ grumbled Ooooooo. ‘Its not like they were rotten or anything. Just the opposite – even their water crunched!’

Eroh really did not understand half of what these dolphins were saying, and that only made it worse. He was about to make a desperate dash, when Ooooooo's tone suddenly changed.

‘But then, there were the humans...’ His image was perfect. No merman, this, but a true bipedal, forward-facing man – and infused with such love that the sonic felt warm on the skin. Before Eroh could even react, Ach chimed in with an identical image, confirming that he agreed. But slowly both shifted the love to a longing, until Eroh was embued by their pain.

They broke off and veered away together as if he no longer mattered. But there was no way Eroh was going to let them go now. Humans! These guys knew humans! Eroh *had* to hear more. With reckless courage he swifited to in front of them. ‘Wait!’ he whistled, head on. ‘You shared with a Human?’ His image was female, while theirs had been male, but the woman he’d met was still so clear in his mind that his sonic was every bit as true to life as theirs had been.

Impressed out of their distraction, the Dyad pulled up, and Ooooooo acknowledged solemnly: ‘The Sacred Obligation.’ But, instead of the traditional sonic of a dolphin lifting a dolphin to the surface, Ooooooo’s dolphin was under and lifting a human.

Eroh was amazed. Then his own recent encounter blared in his mind and he needed to be sure he was apace. Was Ooooooo’s sonic a variation on the catechismal metaphor, or had a human actually *been* in the water with him? Eroh made something large and gangly splash into the sea, and hoped Ooooooo would resolve the details. The stranger accommodated.

‘They’d wrap themselves in rubber, metal, and plastic, breathing underwater, just to be with us,’ he boasted soberly. The paraphernalia that surrounded his human, including a metal tank filled with a gas so bright it was almost deafening, made Eroh’s new friend seem almost a Freeskin by comparison. Eroh figured he had simply misunderstood ‘breathing underwater’. But it was the perfect rendering of plastic – the way it formed a kind of negative space, not there, but not water either – that somehow made him the most uneasy. Still, he was thrilled with the news.

‘They were always there’ Ooooooo went on. ‘Every mission.’ Eroh had barely registered the new, yet somehow familiar concept of ‘mission’ – like ‘hunt’, but with the beam tuned not to flesh, but to metal – when Ack began to scream.

‘All clear! All clear!’ Ooooooo whistled loudly, and Ack’s distress, after a moment, slowly ebbed away.

For a while they swam together silently, all three shaken. Then Ooooooo began to reminisce again.

‘The missions were a go, mostly.’ He was talking to Ack now. ‘Can’t you hear any of that any more? The humans, the training, going out on the boat --?’

Eroh stopped dead, and the Dyad actually sluiced ahead of him a bit, then turned to face his way.

‘You’ve been ON a boat?!’ Eroh asked, incredulous. He hardly knew how to shape the question; where would, how could that happen?

Ooooooo was growing tired of this rube. ‘Lotta missions were far from the base --’ he said, turning away.

Eroh wasn’t sure what Ooooooo meant, but he nonetheless he found himself believing the fantastic claim. It was preposterous, and yet everything about these two dolphins was so peculiar, that it seemed just possible. But then he realized, that meant these guys would KNOW!

‘So who is in charge, on the boat I mean?’ he blurted. He was embarrassed that he’d asked what he hoped was a stupid question, but he had to know. Soon he would change his mind.

‘The Great Crab!’ Ack shrieked in reply.

‘NO!’ Eroh gasped, his hopes crashing like a wave.

‘Its true’ said Ooooooo, half to himself. ‘Has to be. We never heard it ourselves, but it was far away. It would call, send a message. And the humans would do what it said...’

Ack started to moan.

Eroh didn’t understand.

‘Gotta be so!’ Ooooooo’s dissonance was worse than ever. ‘If the humans had been in charge, they would never has sent us out on that last mission--’

Ack’s moan resolved itself into another revolving image. This time, it was a hand...

‘He blames himself’ said Ooooooo, in a soft aside. ‘But it was not our fault!’ much louder. ‘The Great Crab set us *all* up!’

Eroh wasn’t following all of this, but he understood enough to know that it was aimed at undermining everything he wanted to believe in. The ‘Great Crab’ was an ignorant superstition! How could he have been sucked in by these guys – obviously a couple of lunatics!

‘Gullshit!’ he spluttered.

This made Ooooooo angry. Which, of course, made Ack even angrier. They faced him off, tight and loud, clapping their jaws and arching to loom huge.

‘Then how do you explain *this* mission?!’ Ooooooo shrilled at him. ‘I felt their hearts breaking when they opened that gate.’

Ack seemed to forget that he was in the middle of a threat, and drifted off, his eyes wide, his silent bubbles streaming.

Ooooooo too had dropped his intimidating posture. ‘He thinks we escaped’ he said almost listlessly. ‘But the humans let us go. We just wish they had told us our mission...’

Eroh was at a loss.

‘Its need-to-know’ Ooooooo muttered to himself. ‘Strictly need-to-know.’ His sonic of a dolphin not echolocating, as an object repeatedly crossed its path, made no sense to Eroh. Plus, he’d imbued it with that tinny quality, the thinned-out harmonics that implied you were quoting someone else. Who would want to propagate such an image? Eroh looked him in the eye, and the sadness he saw there was daunting. Then Ooooooo left to corral his wayward companion, and before Eroh knew what was happening, the mysterious Dyad was gone.

Eroh coasted, uncertain what to think or do. Then, just at the edge of visibility, Ack reappeared, alone. Not reticent any longer, Eroh scrutinized him with an intensive beam. But something in Ack’s demeanor made him go silent. Then Ack let out a sound so deep and loud, it heaved Eroh’s entire body, and put Turk’s shallow imitation to shame. This creature had been close to the Great Noise. Very close.

Then he was gone for good.



Clair’s Journal – July 16

No d’s. Started today by watching the news – big mistake! Now I’m stuck with fretting and anger and fear for the rest of the day...

haiku

these petroleum
products have been too long dead –
seek more nascent fare!

To the 37,134 wild horses still left in the USA, I salute you!



Finally, he’d found her! Just as he’d expected, Eewah was traveling in consort, a triad of males surrounding her. It thrilled him to see how, as ever, she swam less as if herded, than dutifully attended, by the ponderous males. There was nobody like her in the sea! Eroh recognized the triad, Orroh, at once – a long-term coalition who, like Eewah herself, had been adults since before he was born. He knew that he was in for it as soon as he’d been detected, but nothing could keep him away from Eewah now.

Orroh turned as one, blood up for a challenge, whining to confirm it was him. Undulating to rumple the field and to loom in the vertical plane, they drove at him, a three-pronged vortex, spraying him with sound. At first, he let them buffet him like he was a first-spot punk, and they, the Masters Marine. But in his impatience his self abrogation lost to audacity, and her blurted her name.

Now he was really in trouble.

They clustered tight, co-berating, explosive synchronous reports colliding in his head. All that was male got called up in him, and he took them on, swiveling to drive right through them, their open mouths pressed along his flanks. Wagging and squawking, again and again, the triad converged and pummeled him with triaphonic honks. Eroh had jostled with Orroh all his life - had felt them, over the years, go from tolerant, to annoyed, to a threat - and this time, he knew, that they would hold nothing back. He was a lone bull and they were guarding the prize.

But Eroh was determined. He took it in the face and waggled right back. And though it only made them harangue him harder, they had to admire the kid. And they were honored, too, that he was giving them his best. A unified juggernaut, they made a final charge and drove him clear out the water, manifest proof of their power to deny him the sea. But they were not there when it hauled him back in with a splash. Eewah had chuffed and curved away, having had quite enough of testosterone, and all four males hustled along to follow.

Eroh came oblique abeam and sent a 'NEED!' - the classic inverted echo that seemed to suck the hearer nearer - directly at Eewah's head. But one of Orroh blocked her line of sound. (Eroh couldn't even remember their individual signatures anymore - they were only, always Orroh.) But he had come too far, and on too dear a purpose. Beach these bulls! He needed Eewah to know...

He launched a hyperbolic to confront them, and once melon to melons, blasted an image of his human for all to hear. Eewah's subtle lurch told him to hush and get into formation, as she let the outraged bulls speak their minds.

'Shark's teeth, boy! Shark's teeth!' cautioned one.

'Bah - he's been buzzing for flying fish in the sand forever' grumbled another.

Such clichés did nothing for Eroh's impatience.

'Shellless spawn of the Great Crab!' intoned the third, encased in prejudice thicker than blubber. 'Drowning out the world!'

Eroh had heard it all before. The Crab without a carapace, unswathed by the sea, who scuttles on land to meet his need for ever bigger shells. Fierce but weak, clawed but brittle and soft, carried sideways on marching feet, greedy, ambitious, unrepentant, a scavenger somehow in control of the human mind. Even with echos of the Great Noise still cycling in his head, Eroh would not believe. He'd seen the real shell-seeking crabs on his prolonged, land-gazing haul-outs - tiny scramblers, in tidepools and moonlit dunes, easily startled to duck and hide, but soon back about their business. Hardly the monsters of myth. That giant cousins of these commanded the boats, bringing the harvest back to land, spreading clamor and toxins, was fluidly absurd! Eroh could no sooner credit this than he could the fantastic tales of bulbous, white, non-leaping whales who lived where the sea was so cold, the surface of the ocean was harder than the floor - preposterous! And given the Quest on which rode his heart, the notion that it was the Great Crab that provided the hulking metal shells that offered men protection on the sea in return for control of their actions, seemed outright profane. Humans were sentient. They would know right from wrong and choose for themselves...

Eewah suddenly dropped back and down and Eroh, ready, came to her side. The triad started to rail, but Eewah whistled a stop. 'Are you really afraid that that he will make off with me?' she chided them good-humoredly, her sonic of herself, draped across Eroh's snout, being bounced along as he haplessly tried to escape. The bulls tightened their ranks and syche'd their surfacing, but grudgingly took up a course abreast, a sound-private distance away.



Clair's Journal - July 16

Language links us to our world, but it also imposes a degree of separation. Consider that wonderful study with the chimps, who cannot, for the life of them, *not* point to the larger pile of M&Ms even though they know that whichever pile they pick first will be given to the other animal. And even though they scream and bang the bars when, time and again, they watch the larger pile being given away, they cannot curb desire from leading their hand. But, train them up on the numerals 1 through 9, and then prop two of those in front of them, and they solve the task at once. Funny, isn't it, how placing a symbol, literally and figuratively, between the animal and the candy prompts it to think twice, delaying action for the sake of reiteration. When the chimp points to the smaller number and gains the larger pile, a rational mind prevails.

I always figured that it was the arbitrary nature of the symbol, bearing no physical similarity to its referent, that was key here. Actively sharing symbols provides a relevant way to engage which omits evocative sensation - when the numbers or words are there, the M&Ms often are not. Once you sever that connection to perceptual reality, you are left in a hollowed, more dispassionate space, laced with a network of nodes, like stars in a darkened sky, each point of light a byte. I've always loved playing with the Cat's Cradles you can form stringing those points together. But, lately, thinking about dolphins, I've come to wonder what other playgrounds there may be.

Perhaps the cosmic perspective does not require abstracting to an arbitrary point. Maybe putting an analogue between oneself and reality – a photo of a pile of M&Ms, for instance, or, better yet, a painting - would work as well. Can recognizable echoes of reality still sidestep the circuit that takes one directly to need? Can they still set one at a distance, preoccupied with reference, substituting simulation for action? Or are analogues simply too translucent, tinting but not occluding events in the world? Need using them denote a system somehow less abstract, less detached? They may be *of* the thing they are about, but they're still about it. If we're looking for a point of detachment, that should serve.

And analogue systems do 'about' in such a lovely way. Consider parrots. If one gives a call, and another imitates it, the mimic has, therein, made reference. The repeated call reactivates the neural circuits that pulsed during their earlier, shared experience. A great way to show a potential mate that one is paying attention, such imitations run similarity metrics in both their brains, evoking a compulsion to do more and still more of the same. For imitation does not just tap relevance, it magnifies it; once you draw attention to a particular similarity by enacting it, you increase its salience manifold.

Dolphins do what parrots do, and perhaps much more. (Parrots probably do a lot more as well.) If, as I'd like to imagine, the dolphins are out there imitating the echoes of perception, such acts, too, would refer. But the consequent explosion of possibilities, where anything you can 'see' you can say, starts to form an epistemologically ominous cloud. A system with as many descriptors as it has events seems not to describe at all, only translate. My bet is that once the profusion becomes too great, order will shift it down an info-friendly notch, and patterns will emerge.

Surely, for example, the cloud would coalesce around certain vocal conventions, group-specific habits for mentioning commonplace events. Probably simplified, often exaggerated, never a perfect copy of that to which they refer, but one which amplifies some aspects and scatters others. Such renderings may be easier to make, and to remember, if they inhabit a community of rituals whose web of inter-dependence allows any one, in context, to evoke appropriate others. Once such a community is established, and reference can be made to it as well – you're there: Language! For just as gesture and the spoken word give a bodily shape to higher concepts, so too could endogenous echoes. And any sufficiently complex, self-referential mapping of the world, once it's engaged in social purpose, will generate metaphor, counter-factuals, reflection – all the abstract detachment you could want...

For language, analogue or otherwise, is created through negotiation. For all that it loves the reclusion of a philosophic mind, the social domain is the natural habitat of language, and it is there we must seek its origins. Thus, in an analogue system, the imitator's susceptibility to enculturation would subject the multiformity of its calls to selection by a whole society of interlocutors. That susceptibility is audible in the song of the Humpback Whale, for instance, which changes across the mating season, and all the singers keep up. Apply that kind of attunement to complex interaction, in species who construe and strategize, and language, nuanced and comprehensive, could readily ensue. Meaning would be carried in the common use of forms, and in the contrasts of their uncommon uses. Constraining dialogue to converge on interpretation, convention would provide the regularity, and invention the novelty, to perpetuate this manner of exchange. Give it all a history - from the unending changes reeked by everyday utterance, the living culture – and how different would it be after all? Could some transform be applied to render such a language human-intelligible? Or is echolocation – its speed, its subtlety, its feel – just too alien? If they're out there talking to each other, could we tell?!



Eewah was wondering what she should tell the sweet, obsessive soul who flanked her, murmuring 'Initiate' again and again, respectfully awaiting, though near to bursting, her ritual response. He was not the only young male that she had taught the rigors of sex, but he had certainly been her favorite. And it wasn't just that he had been a more than apt apprentice – her belly flushing slightly at the memory of the subtle tacto-acoustic techniques he had developed. No, Eroh was special - he heard the world differently from everybody else. She had known this day would come, and now that it had, she was surprised at how sad it made her. The school would be the lesser without him. But he had a fine strong heart, clear jaw channels, and a curiosity that conveyed him like a current. No matter what, she realized, he would do just fine.

'Mentor' she whistled at last, releasing him to dart and waggle, chirping 'Venerable! Venerable!', bubbles popping, 'til he used up the last of his air. When she synchronized with his gulps from the sky, he was finally able to calm.

He broadcast again his human's image, working hard on the particulars, wanting to be sure that Eewah understood that the woman was submerged and real.

She swam along for a moment and then upswept ‘So, why--’. She used the imperative whistle, rather than the interrogative sonic, the same one that calves delighted in repeating, meaning to them merely ‘Tell!’, but which in time, as life grew complex, came to mean ‘Explain’. She already knew the answer, but she thought it best to make him form the sounds.

At first he was silent, thinking hard, struggling to put into an image that which compelled him so. In the end, all he could say was ‘Our forelimbs have the same bones!’ – the five-fingered skeletal flipper morphing into a hand and back, showing indeed how similar under the skin. ‘Kindred!’ he whistled, abandoning the sophisticated sonics for the primal trilling of their school’s own signature call.

Eewah was moved by how much it mattered to him. ‘How will you go about it?’ she asked.

Eroh, for all his fantasies, had never thought that far. ‘Follow her, I guess’ he replied. Then, as the future overtook him he flushed, saline to saline, and exclaimed ‘I’ll ride her bow!’

Eewah pumped, resonating, and the two, exalted, sprang from the water and dove, a coherent whole. The honor of her empathy was almost more than he could bear and he knew that this moment would carry him through whatever seas might heave him. Surfing her approval, he squawked and clanged and screamed, mixing imitations and the twanging echos of iron, chromium and tin. But Eewah, sobering, slowed.

‘Seeking, intrigued, is wonderful’ she said, ‘but do not covet them. Take care you do not forget from whence you came.’

Eroh coursed, atuned.

‘Humans can stay so long in one place!’ Eewah urged him gently. ‘They even like to be dry. It must be all too easy for them to forget we are all made of water. Beware the folly of anchor, the lie of possession. Help them to feel the power of surrender, the divinity of dissolution. The air is no less an ocean, for all its inability to buoy – it rocks them still. Your greatest kindness will be to show how it is to stay apace.’ She reached out and slide her pec along his side. ‘And some tide, please, come back and tell us what you have learned in return...’

Eroh pledged his troth. Ardent and resolute, merging with the sound of truth, the dolphin credo seemed to well up all around him:

Take care of others
Enjoy life
Revere how the whole is greater than the self

This he would truly do.

Without another sound, he tilted his farewell and strove off to make her proud. And Eewah had to admit to the envy in his wake.



Clair recognized him right away from the scars she’d noted on his fin. He had some fresh ones too, she saw, as he came skimming her way. Grabbing her gear, she tried to relinquish ever knowing the history this creature would bring to bear. She would have to settle for what was happening now. For Eroh’s part, he was already spraying when her body broke the water, and he knew, from the way that she moved, that it was her. A wild, lonely animal, what he needed most was to coincide. And in that moment both understood their lives had changed forever.

They unfurled with glee...

And now, Dear Reader, the time has come
for you to take a hand
and choose how you would have it go,
this tale of Sea and Land.
If I can humbly recommend

a path I've oft selected,
you've much to gain from play, good faith,
and the unexpected...
Enjoy!



AUTHOR'S NOTE:

All the physical behavior described in this story has been observed, or performed, by biologists in the field. It is with the dolphins' mental lives, of course, that I take poetic liberties. Double quotes (“ ”) are meant to indicate actual utterances; single quotes (‘ ’) might be thought of more as translations, glosses of ensonified meanings. The facts that Clair discusses are based on credible research findings; hopefully her speculations about them are distinguishable from the data themselves.

For as long as peoples have recorded their histories, reports of lone dolphins leaving their kind to take up the company of humans have been documented. There are a handful of such animals today, scattered around the globe, named and prized by their local bipeds, rising up out of the water to give us an eye. I was just wondering why.