

On the Water

A sailing ship is moving slowly down a river towards the estuary it makes with the sea. The captain, a man called Jackson, is talking to a lad called Tricky, who's making his first voyage.

Jackson What's your name, boy? Tricky, is it?
Tricky Yessir.
Jackson First time you've been at sea.
Tricky It will be sir, when we get there.
Jackson Don't be smart, boy. I'm the sea. The moment I step on board, you're at sea!
Tricky Sir!
Jackson Watch the men as we go down river. They're saying goodbye to their women. Ask yourself, if they're as sad as they pretend to be, why are they going to sea?
Tricky That's what I'm wondering myself, sir.
Jackson I'll ask you the same question when we get back. If!
Tricky If?
Jackson If!

The orchestra mimics the word, both as a question and a statement made in acceptance. Jackson goes off and Tricky moves to the bow, watching the banks on either side. Then we hear some of the sailors and the women they're leaving behind.

Tom You'll have to do without me, Moll.

Moll A big wave's going to swallow you Tom, or a fish! A whale, with a mouth as big as the moon!
Tom Be faithful, Moll! When you leave the pub you do it on your own!
Moll If there's someone else, Tommy, what can you do about that?
Tom I'll haunt your dreams. I'll squeeze you by the throat!
Moll What sort of threat is that? All I have to do is wake up.
Tom You won't! Oh no, you won't!
Meg I fed you honey, Russ. Don't go licking the spoon for any other girl.
Russ My tongue's hanging out for more.
Meg Your tongue! Keep everything else tucked well away!
Russ You've had me hard for weeks, now all of a sudden I'm to be soft?
Meg You've got to be a coiled-up rope, waiting to be used.
Russ Oh, women! You want us to swear to things when you know there's no hope!
Hope That's my name you're using. Hope! It's what women provide you with!

Harry That, and fear. Anxiety, stress and strain. As God's my witness, I say two people can't be faithful. What do you take us for? There's islands where we're gods, and gods have a choice, you know?

Tom And a duty to do what's required.

The three men laugh raucously, then their laughter turns to something sad.

Harry Who wants to be a god? Sitting on a cloud, watching the whole creation procreate? Not this one. I'm dreaming of an ocean full of islands, and on every island there's a girl for me, and another three or four ...

Hope Miserable bastards! Go on your trip and drown! And don't call me for help! I'll be on my knees telling God to let you drown, since you were willing to leave!

Jackson (from above the sailors) Take a sounding, bosun. And tell me if the water's salt.

Moll They're going to tick-tack, this way and that.

Meg It's like they're cutting slices off the bread that's land ...

Hope Zig-zag, tick-tack, zig-zag, tick-tack ...

Moll Off you go, lovers. We'll be waiting ...

Meg When the waves are towering over you, you'll see us in the foam ...

Hope Phantoms and spirits, let loose in the wind ...

Moll When the sea's boiling with rage ...

Meg ... we'll be part of it ...

Hope ... listening to the fear in your souls, shrieking ...

All three (a terrible shriek, softening as one voice replaces another in an extended melisma which softens, and quietens, until it's no more than a sound resembling the movement of the breeze) Aaaaaaaaaahhh, aaaaaaaaaahhh, aaaaaaaaaahhh ... aaaaaaaaaahhh ... oooooooooohhh ... mmmmmmmmm ... mmmmmmmmm ...

Harry Every time I come home I swear I'll never leave ...

Tom ... and every time I do.

Russ When I'm at sea I have to come home and when I'm home I have to go to sea.

A bell rings.

Jackson Four hour watches. Those not on duty go below.

Tricky Can I drink the water here, sir?

Jackson It's in between lad. Nasty. By the time your watch ends, we'll be at sea.

Tricky All my life I've wanted to be at sea.

Jackson Dreams. When do we wake? Up the mast boy, go on, up you go. What can you see up there?

Tricky I'm still climbing sir. You won't leave me here all night, will you?

Jackson You're as safe up there as anywhere. What can you see?

Tricky reaches the top of the mast.

Tricky I can see darkness settling, sir.

Jackson Can you see the sun rising yet, boy?
 Tricky Not unless I turn around, captain.
 Jackson Then turn you little bastard.
 Tricky I'm not a bastard sir. You're not to call me that!
 Jackson Of course you're a bastard. It's why your people wanted to get rid of you. Experience, they said.
 Huh!
 Tricky (roused) Are there any other bastards on your ship, sir?
 Jackson Every single one of them. Me included. Why else would we be here?
 Tricky Can I come down now sir?
 Jackson Tell me what you see.
 Tricky I see the world growing cold, but it knows it'll be warm again.
 Jackson And?
 Tricky I see the sky getting ready to do its trick.
 Jackson Spreading your name across the sky, are you?
 Tricky It's a good name sir. It's the nature of the world.
 Jackson Where's my mate? Lee?
 Lee (appearing) Sir!
 Jackson I'm going below, Mister Lee. The boy's up there.
 Lee The boy sir? (seeing him) Oh.
 Jackson Leave him up there a while. Talk to him. Then bring him down.
 Lee He's very young sir.

Jackson His voice'll break before we get home. Then he'll be looking for islands like the rest of them.
 Lee The rest of us sir. Include me in that.
 Jackson Women. It's a man's world and they're our shadows.
 Lee Other way round, sir. The stage of life is theirs, and we play the bit parts.
 Jackson I'll sleep on your thoughts, Mister Lee. Talk to the boy.
 He goes below.
 Lee (after a pause) Are you afraid, Master Tricky?
 Tricky I was, sir, when I was on deck. But up here it seems free. The worst thing that could happen is that I'd be caught by a wave, and drown.
 Lee Most of us are afraid of that.
 Tricky It's quick, and clean. I'd be taken into everything else. I'd leave nothing but my name.
 Lee Tricky.
 Tricky It's a silly name sir.
 Lee How'd you get it?
 Tricky My step-father gave it to me. He didn't want me in the house.
 Lee So you're at sea.
 Tricky And you sir? Nobody tipped you out of home.
 Lee My mother said she'd give me everything I wanted, and I said she couldn't do it.
 Tricky What did you want, sir?

Lee I wanted to live in disgrace and shame, then slowly to make myself pure.

Tricky Pure?

Lee Pure.

We begin to hear the women's voices again, calling softly across the water.

Moll You can come home clean to Moll, so long as you've washed off all your dirt.

Meg Teach that boy what his body's for, then we'll bring him to life.

Hope Let him sleep now, let him down, send him below.

Moll He needs to dream ...

Meg He needs to love ...

Hope He has to learn to love ...

Moll *There's* a journey of a lifetime ...

Meg *There's* a journey with no end ...

Hope When love enfolds him he'll be home at last.

Lee Come down, Tricky. Go below, and sleep.

Tricky What about you, sir?

Lee I shall engage the stars in conversation, until the captain comes up to contradict.

Tricky Is he difficult sir?

Lee No more than the rest of us. Sleep well.

Tricky goes below, the last of the light fades, and then the stage becomes very dark while the music muses a little longer, and the three women hum quietly in the distance, serenely settling the

scene. There is a moment of complete darkness and stillness, then, as the lights rise, we see that the ship is moving at exhilarating speed, and that Tom, Russ and Harry are in the rigging, unfurling more sails, while Tricky is back in the crow's nest and Lee is at the helm. The women's voices are rising too, full of envy tinged with scorn.

Women Going nowhere fast!

Tom What a cracker! The sky's full of light ...

Russ This wind's got the waters under control ...

Harry Hey! The master's piling on the sail! Hey!

Men Hey! Heeeeeeeeeey!

Women See how fast they run! Away! How fast they run away! Away!

Men Hey! Heeeeeeeeeey!

Tricky There's something new wherever I look!

Lee Go for it men. Days like this are rare!

Tricky Schools of fish and flocks of birds ...

Lee Hang on hard! Hang on!

A wave splashes the ship, making everybody wet. They all laugh, even the women who at this stage represent the ocean as much as themselves.

Moll Treacherous, faithless, only seeking thrills!

Tom Wheeeeeeee!

Meg Only children, clinging to anything that takes you away!

Russ Wheeeeeeee!

Hope They're harnessing the wind! We've got to bring it to a stop!

Men Whoooooooooooooooooohhh!

Tricky It's quieter up ahead!

Lee We'll take her 'round that.

Men Keep her going sir!

Lee I'll race her till the sky's run out of breath!

Tricky The sea's quiet up ahead.

Tom Shut up boy. You're only a spoilsport.

Tricky I'm telling you what I see.

Russ Make a wind! Keep her going like she was.

Lee We're losing speed.

Harry Where are we now? Does anybody know?

Hope You're in our grip, we're clinging to make you stop.

Lee Stop.

Tricky (pointing) The water's flat. It's got no life at all.

Hope You'll sit in the blazing sunlight till the fat in your bodies melts.

Tom Betrayed.

Russ Becalmed.

Harry Be buggered! Keep her going sir! More sail?

Lee Roll'em up. We're going nowhere fast.

Tom Fuck a duck, we're stuck.

Russ Not a sight and nary a sound.

Harry You might as well drop anchor Mister Lee, we're going nowhere.

Moll Look for the islands, boys. That's where the native women are.

Meg (sarcastically) They make love the way white women can't, they're so natural, and free!

Hope The wind rushes you to the island women, who fall on their knees with desire!

Women Desire!

Harry (groaning) Oooooohhh!

Women Desire!

Russ I was happier at home.

Women Desire!

Tom We should've stayed with our girls.

Women Desire! (feigning great desire themselves) Aaaaaaaahhh ...

Harry We were on a good thing, why didn't we stick to it?

Russ Better the thing you haven't had than the thing that's in your hand.

Moll If that Tommy was here, I'd tell him there's always a ship in my harbour. I don't need to go to sea.

Tom I'm ashamed.

Meg When I put a light in my window, there's plenty that want to look in on me.

Hope In all the coming and going, there's nobody needs to be alone.

Tricky Alone!

Lee Alone!

Tom It's a bastard being on your own.

Russ There's not a thing we can do. Not a single, rotten thing.

Harry Except cry out to God to send a wind to take us home!

Men A wind, a wind! Aaaaaaaahhh ... A wind, a wind, to take us home!!!

Women Home! Home! Hooooooooooooome.

Men Hooooooooooooome!

Women Hooooooooooooome!

Men Hooooooooooooome!

Women Hooooooooooooome!

Tom Mister Lee, sir, ask the captain to lead us all in prayer.

Lee Prayer!

Tom God alone can move us sir, if he pleases ...

Russ ... with a wind ...

Harry I need to be home sir. My wife might be having a child.

Lee And whose would that be? Do you know?

Harry Mine sir, of course. She's my Hope. She wouldn't be unfaithful to me.

Lee Those who say that would say anything. Captain Jackson?

Jackson (below) What is it Mister Lee?

Lee The men are hoping, sir, that you'll lead them in prayer.

Jackson (amused) And what are they wanting, those men of mine? A storm to wash them on rocks? Or they think there's an island, just out of sight?

Lee They want to be home sir, with their wives and lovers.

Tricky (from the crow's nest) I want to know that the journey's got an end!

Jackson (still below, and laughing hugely) Are you listening, stupid? Life's a journey, and when the end arrives, most of us are screaming to have it go on! Ha ha ha! Stay aloft, my child. You'll be the first to see the stirring of the breeze.

Tom (groaning in boredom) Oooooooooohhh ...

We see the three women now, in the ocean and in the form of mermaids.

Moll You're empty, so you make a lot of sound.

Meg Roar my bonny boys. If your lust could fill those sails ...

Hope You're stuck. Without a whisper nor a ripple ...

Women (a deflating sound) Ssssssss ...

Russ We'll never get back.

Harry Not a breath of wind.

Tom We'll get in the boat and row.

Lee (flinging buckets and brushes at them) Let's see these decks sparkle! Into it now. Anyone not working feels the lash!

Moll There are pearls in the sea, and tales in the air, and our men are groaning ...

Meg They'll call this adventure when they finally get home ...

Hope When? If! If!

Women If! If! If!

Tricky Hey! That's the question my captain's going to ask me!

Women If! If! If!

Lee That's the question. Tell us the answer, you women of the sea!

Moll You can see us can you mister?

Meg Jump in and swim!

Hope If you catch us you can have us, sailor boy.

Moll Ship ahoy!

Meg Sailor boy!

Tricky Hey, what about me?

Moll What about you?

Tricky If I catch you, can I take you home?

Meg What would you do with us?

Tricky I'd sell you to men that want a wife.

Hope Grow up little boy, and we'll see what we can do for you.

Captain Jackson appears.

Jackson Such a domesticated ocean. We need a storm!

Tom What's he been doing down below?

Russ Praying?

Harry To the devil, more than likely.

Jackson I see a cloud. Two! Look to the horizon, men.

Lee Uh huh!

Moll (to Meg and Hope) Ready darlings. They'll see another side of the sea.

Jackson Everyone aloft!

Lee Sir?

Jackson I want her fully rigged!

Lee There's no wind.

Jackson There will be.

Lee Has God given you a glimpse of what's coming?

Jackson says nothing as the skies darken and the surface of the water shows a few waves.

Meg (to Moll and Hope) They'll see another side of us. Men think that letting hell loose is theirs alone.

Russ I'm scared.

Tricky Why?

Harry He doesn't like the way things are shaping.

Tricky Eh?

Jackson (calling aloft) Hang on hard, boy. Your life's in your fingers in a storm.

Tricky Storm?

Women (quietly) Aaaaaaaahhh ...

Harry Women know things before we do.

Jackson Whoever knows a thing first is the one that caused it. Blame the women by all means, but keep your eyes on me.

He lifts his arms and signals to the air with his hands that he wants a wild wind – and it comes.

Tom Holy hell! That was quick.

Russ How did he do it? He brought this on!

Harry We're spreading sail to see it ripped away!

Lee Furl the sails, sir! Shall I give the order?

Jackson Where are those women? I want to see them swimming across our decks!

Moll We'll grab him. When the storm's at its height.

Meg Take him down and deep so he can look at his ship from underneath ...

Hope ... then let him go ... a cork or a rock, that's what I want to know.

Jackson (listening to the above) I'll tie myself to the mast. You take the wheel, Mister Lee.

Tricky Everything's shaking!

Harry Hang on hard, son. It's every man for himself!

The sea produces a huge wave, which breaks across the ship.

Men Aaaaaaaaahhh!

Women Oooooooooohhh!

Jackson Heaven and hell are fighting for us now!

Tom (as the ship rocks under the slapping of the waves) It's better up here. I don't want to be drowned.

Russ Get the ropes around you. You'll be washed away!

Tricky I've got a home to get to. It's on the land!

Harry You won't see it again, boy. Think hard. Imagine you're sitting by the fire ...

Tricky ... listening to the wind whistling outside ...

Women (as a huge wave drenches the ship) Eeeeeeeehhh!!!

Men Aaaaaaaaahhh!!!

Jackson Oh the joy of going under!

Lee He's the cause of this. Our captain's taking us to the bottom of the sea!

Moll Shall we love you captain? Coming with us for the purest joy of your life?

Jackson Molls the lot of you. I wouldn't go with you to save my soul.

Meg Nothing else can save you, master of the ship. Give me your hands.

Jackson Caress yourselves with curses, you're not getting me.

Hope You started this Master Jackson but only we can stop it, only we, the women of the waves ...

Jackson Fiddlededee. You can't make me afraid and I can make you want me. Who's the master now? Eh? Tell me! You can tear my ship apart but you can't stop me rising in my joy!

Hope Madman! You're killing the others to satisfy yourself!

Jackson Stop me then! Can you? Eh? Stop me if you can!

An even bigger series of waves hits the ship, which rocks and reels under the successive impacts. The masts are rolling with the ship,

almost tossing the men into seething water. They cry in agony and ecstasy, calling to be saved, or perhaps merely to signify to themselves that they are still alive.

Tricky Eeeeeeeehhh ...
Men Aaaaaaaahhh ...
Lee God curse me for ever getting mixed up in this.
Jackson (snarling) Rrrrrrrrhhh ...
Tom (to Tricky) Lock your legs around a bit of wood, and hope to hell it holds!
Women (seductively) Uuuuuuuuhhh ...
Russ (beginning to yield) I'm ready for you now.
Harry Me too. Why not? You coming Tom?
Tricky No! No! No!
Jackson Little wimp. Why shouldn't you die with the rest of us?
Lee The foul-mouthed bastard wanted us to die with him. Come down, you men up there! Get your feet on deck and hang on hard!
Jackson I'll have you hanged Mister Lee. Giving orders when I'm in charge!
Lee You'll have us drowned, so what's the odds!
Women (ever so seductively) Uuuuuuuuhhh ...
Tricky No!
Women Uuuuuuuuhhh ...
Tricky No!
Jackson Out of there boy. Come down here with me!
Tricky No!

Lee Stick to it boy!
Tricky (in desperation and in rage) I've got a home to go to!
Jackson Nobody has any home but the sea. It's our mother and when it wants us, none of us can hold back!
Tricky No! (Then he notices something.) We're going to be blown on shore.
Jackson Jesus wept!
Lee (to the men) She'll roll when she hits the sand. That's when you jump.
Tom It's in the timing, boys. Don't let the water take us back.
Russ Ready!
Harry One! Two! Three!

The three of them jump . The ship rolls over on the sand. The storm begins to quieten. Mister Lee picks his moment, and jumps to the sand also.

Lee Where's the little fellow? Did you survive?
Tom Where are the women? Still in the water, waiting.
Women (ever so seductively) Uuuuuuuuhhh ...
Russ Trying to lure us back to sea ...
Harry ... when they're not trying to keep us on the land.
Jackson You can come down now, boy, since it seems you've survived.
Tricky Is this one of those islands?
Women Ha ha ha.

Moll It's an island little boy, but there's no native women for you here.

Tricky Then I'll be king of the island. Mister Jackson won't be captain here, because he calls himself the sea.

Jackson Sneaky boy.

Tricky (to the women) You can come on my island if you like. Oh, you don't have legs, only tails.

Hope We swim in the seas of your thoughts ...

Meg We can be anything you like.

Moll We can even give you more of yourselves ...

Hope ... to our terrible hurt and pain ...

Tricky I don't know what you mean.

Jackson You'll learn that on your next voyage, boy. Son.

Tricky Son?

Jackson You might as well be. You've done well.

Tricky I've survived, I see ...

Women (ever so seductively) Uuuuuuuuhhh ...

Jackson They're changing their tune, I see.

Women Uuuuuuuuhhh ...

Lee What happened to the storm?

Jackson What's happening to the men?

Tom, Russ and Harry are walking in to the water, trying to keep up with the mermaids, who float or swim away from them, and out to sea again. The sailors follow.

Women (ever so seductively) Uuuuuuuuhhh ...

Men (longingly) Oooooooooohhh ...

Lee Hop down, Tricky. There's no use being up there now.

Tricky I'm sorry, Mister Lee. I don't know how to do it. I think I'm just too proud.

Jackson Will you hop down if I ask you, son? I'd be grateful if you'd join us.

Tricky jumps, and lands between Captain Jackson and Mister Lee.

Tricky (looking after the men) Are those men coming back?

Lee They usually do.

Tricky Then we'll have a crew to get us home.

Jackson There's always a crew. There's always someone mad enough to do what we've just done.