

And he fell into the sea

Tacita Dean

But the young Icarus, overwhelmed by the thrill of flying, did not heed his father's warning, and flew too close to the sun whereupon the wax in his wings melted and he fell into the sea.

Simon Crowhurst, who was fifteen and at school in 1975, remembers the disappearance of Bas Jan Ader; he remembers it very precisely because it was spoken about in connection to his own father's disappearance six years earlier. How his father had disappeared in the ocean was still a mystery to him. It was incomprehensible; alien even. It was a time when people, whole boats went missing in the Bermuda Triangle without rational explanation: strange algae consuming the oxygen out of the sea and causing a vacuum in the air above. Buoyancy was lost and everything became as lead. This was better than the truth, which he only discovered some months later when he took *The Strange Last Voyage of Donald Crowhurst* out of his school library, and his father's fraudulent journey and agonised death at sea was revealed to him. So Bas Jan Ader's disappearance confirmed only that his father was somehow not alone out there and that one day these unfathomable disappearances would have to be resolved.

With disappearance will always come the hope of reappearance. At the same school was the son of John Stonehouse, the British Labour Member of Parliament who left a pile of his clothes on Miami beach in 1974 to stage his own suicide. A minute's silence was held in the Commons and his obituary was published. Australian detectives, acting on a tip-off that Lord Lucan had at last surfaced in Melbourne, inadvertently came across Stonehouse living under an assumed name. He had reappeared.

The boys, Crowhurst and Stonehouse were grouped together at school as many believed Donald Crowhurst had also staged his own death and was living another life in a multitude of reported places. When Ader was reported missing, he joined their fathers' group. After all he was an artist, making a work of art. Everyone believed he would reappear.

But Bas Jan Ader was not a man of stunts. He was making a work of art, but his work of art was not to disappear. He wanted to cross the ocean alone, in answer to the journey that had brought him to California in the first place. He had sailed there as a deckhand and wanted to sail back: to arrive and leave by sea - a romantic equation and obvious apotheosis. His audacity lay only in his desire (casual but nonetheless mindful) to also break the world record by making the trip in the smallest ever boat: 2 feet and 2 inches smaller than the last successful passage. *Ocean Wave* was probably not even double his body's length.

Ader was a master of gravity. But when he fell, all he would say was that *it was because gravity made itself master over him*. He understood the necessary surrender and decisiveness of purpose needed to make gravity his companion, unlike the prosaic James Honeycutt in *The Boy Who Fell Over Niagara Falls*, whose misjudgement of the supremacy of water, left him trying desperately to reverse his ineffective outboard motor on the brink of the Niagara Falls. It is a bad sailor who trusts his engine. Bas Jan Ader probably felt closer to the boy whose very lightness would be his protector as he fell the 161 feet to certain death.

Did Ader feel protected because he was making a work of art? Protected in his pursuit of the sublime, which suspends all truth and postpones the realisation that we are, in fact, dully mortal? More than anyone, he played with this engagement - laid himself open to the possibility of death. Taunted it. Provoked it. Fell for it. Sadly we can only glimpse at the enormity of Bas Jan Ader's

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feat because he failed. Had he completed his Part Two, we would never think enough of what it takes to sail alone across the Atlantic in a boat barely bigger than most sailors' dinghies.

It is perhaps the most unsettling fact of all to learn that *The Strange Last Voyage of Donald Crowhurst* was found in Ader's faculty locker in Irvine some time after he had disappeared. We have to suppose he read it. We have to suppose he imagined Crowhurst's anguished journey in the light of his own incipient one, even if it was only to dismiss it. We have to suppose he knew, as he set out, that there were many ways to fail as there were many ways to succeed.

Icarus, blinded by the elation of his ascent, failed and fell: fell to fail. His was a journey up that came down. Crowhurst's was a journey along: flat, doomed and sorrily human. His fall was wretched, unimagined, unannounced and wholly practical. But for Bas Jan Ader to fall was to make a work of art. Whatever we believe or whatever we imagine, on a deep deep level, not to have fallen would have meant failure.

