la fleur de l’âge

At least, do we have news of Monsieur La Pérouse?
-Louis XVI, on the guillotine

Versailles, 15 August 1785

I can say now with certainty that nothing will be left to the bitter storms of chance. Our gracious Louis consents to the voyage tracing, with trembling finger, Divinity’s path to New Holland, half a world away. “Monsieur,” he says over tea. “We run dry of frontiers these days, so our hope depends on your timbers.” As he inches close to me, like a boy sharing secrets, his ministers quaver. “How I itch to be in salt air again! I curse the riggings of State that bind me to this tedium while you may taste the globe!”

It is so. All France harkens to the altar of expedition as though only these planks have enough future to escape the lockstep of the slavish Present. The king nibbles a last torte, then brushes icing crumbs from his coat. “Mais n’oubliez jamais, Monsieur La Pérouse, notre sang—we French must always value breath above glory. I should die the happiest of kings if your mission should end without costing the life of a single mortal.” Do I dare confess how often I think on death, on the splitting of hulls by Fate’s hidden reef? James Cook
comes to me like some Banquo clinking in chains of assassination. “We never escape the treacherous spears, even in Discovery’s lushest grass. Beware” But I bend before the sceptre as though planets confide in me confident orbits through disordered night.

It is not for the tool to question the angle of its slice through clay, or where its blade will be blunted on a final rock. Not for me.

**Brest, 1 August 1785**

On deck, *Père Le Receveur* blesses our provisions, which is well since the sinews of our riggings are so worn. But my complaints are ignored —

“lesser captains than you, Monsieur, found them taut enough for a brutal wind. Surely your skill...” *Le Père* speaks more of exotic stems and leaves than any Hereafter, which I fear will come soon enough without his aid. Women hug their men as tearfully as when we sailed against Britain.

Is there no less war in commerce? On the dock huddle scores of the downcast whose petitions to join us we rejected, favouring their betters.

*Bonaparte was his name. When he knocked at my door that night I mistook him in lamplight, his tone and dress so bristled with nobility.*

“I tire of the academy,” he said. “We can learn nothing of deeds from books, of what France might become, once freed from the shackles of failure.

*I want to sail for glory! I found him imperious, harmless on soil, perhaps, but the kind of man on ship who fodders mutiny. “I fear,” I said,*
"that your ambition will not find room with us, Monsieur. Our frail ships voyage for the glory of science, not war." And thus I dismissed him.

We cast off dock, cries for our safe passage mingling with silent prayers of execration from those we have disappointed. The wind fills our sails, as if in haste to dissolve any threads of connection with the ordered shore. The men set to, become a crew, once their farewells lose voice over the waves. We are two hulls pulsing to the ocean's sway - Boussole and Astrolabe. The sun is behind us.

Somewhere off the Alaskan Coast, 12 May 1786

We are twenty-one dead now, so with whom can I sift through the tea-leaves of my dream? The whale came to me in the dark waters of sleep and spoke of storms, when the ocean was calm and greenest under spring sun and the shoreline beckoned with fresh growth.

Beauty is death's handmaiden. Once you relax under the spell of her perfume, La Pérouse, you are undone, your soul reft from its purse while you sleep under tides of contentment. But you see only the surface of things you have no air sacs or flippers to plumb the depths of your destiny. You marvel as I assert my bulk above the waves, shattering, however briefly, the liquid tension that webs me in and under. But how can you know what gales and teeth I endure once my eyelids thicken? Yours will come!
I never knew the sea could rear itself into such fists to splinter us. It was all we could do to fight free of the shore and its gaping rocks. The waves crashed against the hull until it groaned like a body anxious for death then they surged above us in horrid torrents that swept off all who had not manacled themselves to rail or mast, hurtling them like morsels into the waiting tongues of the sea. Above this spew of clouds, no angels heard our cries. Our ashes did not matter.

Botany Bay, 23 January 1788

I fear the anchoring most now. Braced against the wind, a man forgets fatigue, the strain of waves distracting him from his bones until his failures scrape off like deadened skin. This morning I gazed into a glass and could not deny how bald and toothless I have become. In the harbour's calm I wonder if senility can be far behind: what medals console the centenarian?

To have come this far and still be dogged by the British! Captain Phillip plays host to our misfortunes, sparing us biscuits when my men crave meat. His physician ministers to Le Père, who still bleeds from the Samoan spear. Were we wrong to dip water pails on that strange shore? The Captain permits us space to frame longboats for the charting that remains
to be done, but I worry about the Indians
who clamber up the stones of the palisade
at dusk, pointing dark fingers at our fires —

if they could cup flames in their hands
they would surely try to burn our boats
if we sleep at sentry. Can they be blamed

when we 'ghosts' so despoil their land
with human refuse? One night the guards
brought in two convicts whose backs still bled

from the lash. They begged asylum of me.
"If you believe in God," one cried, "you'll not
return us to such torture!" I sought counsel

from Le Père, but his wounds so wrecked
him that he could not speak for the fever.
There, by his flickering flame, I prayed

twice that Jesus might dispense wisdom
as mercy. At dawn, with eyes averted
to our boats in harbour; I sent them back.

Botany Bay, 10 March 1788

It is not a month since we lowered Le Père
to rest yet it seems a world since he stood
on deck by me laying on hands. I thought

to bury him at sea, but our preparations
were not complete, besides, he always
spoke more warmly of petals than fins

so I did not think he would begrudge us
planting him in soil still to be explored,
our fleur de l'âge under this foreign sun.

As the men row us out to the Boussole,
Captain Phillip and his honour guard
see us off in their crisp red uniforms,
but I cannot smile on them for long,  
the sun glancing off their helmets and medals  
blinds me so. “Sail with God,” he said,  
saluting, as I stepped off. “In the storms  
of uncertainty only His flag matters!”  
Was it my fear I saw reflected in his eyes?  

Back onboard the ship, I feel myself dispense  
the orders like one who speaks from a dream,  
responding tonelessly to an invisible magnet  
of cool metal that embodies a coalescent Fate  
under whose fingers we are wicks of spent  
wax preparing for the ravages of night.  

Yet the blue water and saltspray seduce me  
from my depression. In a freshening breeze  
one sees no death in an albatross wing  
or silky clouds. I think one last time about  
Le Père and the clods of red earth above him,  
sprouting sucking grass. Then I turn away.  

Near Vanikoro, 26 April 1788  
The storm took its fury from the hidden reef  
of my dream. They brought me back to Albi —  
a sack of bones, a silver candlestick, a bronze  
buckle. No priest stood over the damp hole  
before the impatient shovels but a king shivering  
in tattered uniform, tears beading in his eyeless  
sockets. He spoke of lost worlds: “the ancient  
spirit of discovery appears to be extinct.”  
The words were mine, the spirit his.

David P. Reiter