

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 foddors 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.*

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