

DAVID P. REITER

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.

STEPHEN HALL

ABROAD-THOUGHTS FROM HOME

The sleek, sun-bitten faces glare into
this distant room from the morning chill
of the Otavalo market. Rugs slung
over an arm, brilliantly red, hand-woven,
offered to me standing here on axminster,
reaching into an empty pocket for foreign coins.

Staring into the camera and from my
coffee table, a half-empty mug placed on
the curling corner, oppressing the paper
with its 43 beans, impassive faces with their
cold coffee skin seem as bewildered by the flash,
the photographer, as by me, wanting to travel.

I calculate cost and days later, nothing done,
my afternoons still settle over the Cordilleras,
failing to melt the snow or warm the cheeks.