SAMPLER

Periplous
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First published in the United Kingdom in 2016 by Shearsman Books
50 Westons Hill Drive
Emersons Green
BRISTOL
BS16 7DF

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30–31 St. James Place, Mangotsfield, Bristol BS16 9JB
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www.shearsman.com


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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to David Morley for his encouragement of the idea; and to the editors of The Warwick Review, where an early extract of the poem was published.
A Greek merchant-explorer Pytheas – whose home port was the Greek colony of Massalia (Marseilles) – is said to be the first person to have circumnavigated the British Isles, in 325 BCE, thereby fixing the islands in the historical imagination as archipelagic, maritime, aloof. His own account of the voyage is lost.
I. Journey’s jargon

Web-footed we’ve grown,
drifters with brackish beards
playing a hide-and-seek of peninsulas
with a minch of water. Once
I saw a woman washing
another woman’s hair in a pail

but that was outside a tent
in a torn white night.
Hay-moon of midges, a wailing child.
Our sails are ripped and sodden,
we paddle around and around, Kantion
Belerion Orkas Belerion Orkas

Kantion, the blue tattoo
of ridge-pines on a too-far mountain,
the paint of their war cries,
the lack of guest ethic, just the salt-lick of our fingers no honey
a knuckle of bread no milk,

hallucinating again
a woman with dripping hair
Tethys in her drownedness kelp-like,
the psychogeography of rapefields
and scythe-wheeled clearings
our postcard home.
Offshore we sit at dark tables
of angles and tangents, our tell-tales
flap against the berg of sky.
This is the iron age,
too much subject to the Bear,
and we are waiting for what –

the Romans to come with their *pax* and leather umbrellas?
II. Armada

Flare. A blare of fire on the moor. And now over there gilding the crest-feathers of the inrushing tide a forest of coals burning bright as a lucifer, a surf of flame, a flagrancy, Helen once again on the pyre of Troy aglaos in the search-and-destroy arc-lights in her petticoat her tiara of scorched hair the hill-fort of hot ash and the pretty god Siva with bells on his toes spinning the length of the fence from shore to shore rousing the twelve fair counties against the armada fall of the city Carthage Massalia Graveney Marsh. We were there. As the sun dropped into the bay we stood to and stared at the wave of fire spreading steadily out through the night from beachy head to the chalk horse, torching the peak of the high peak, then the cheviots and teviot, even as far as the slieves and the treehouse on the savannah et commixtam Volcanus ad astra favillam
till in the hour before dawn we saw
a paper boat come gliding downriver
with its small quivering flame, a mayfly alight
for less than a day, the candle-end
of a soul. I wept then
for the spent match of my life:

at what point may a man call himself happy?
III. Catalogue of ships

She was down on all fours
me behind on top of her clutching
the rough mane of her hair
our heaving backs to the dull heat
of the burning city
same old war only game in town

groundhog day but what I missed
was the *hapax legomenon*
of the wren in the spindle-tree.
The next time we were shipping slaves
POWs from Scythia Phrygia Lydia
Syria Ilyria floggable goods

even in cloudcuckooland
exchangeable for alcohol & muskets
fine-art *bògòlanfini*. Somewhere
there’s a beach of long-bones, delicate
manacled wrist-bones you could scoop up
in handfuls. *In Phylace*

*he left behind a wife to tear her cheeks
in grief* in Ghana Guinea Benin
in Congo Mozambique *las aventuras
de un marino sin escrúpulos*
but with a terrible itch for travel
and consequently I may never find now
the deepest romance the love
of my life my grandson asleep
newborn on my chest. Such a short time left
to finish the round trip, build the wharves
and warehouses, sew up the bag of winds –

_And when, where, how or ever again?…_