

Periplous


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The Twelve Voyages of Pytheas


Shearsman Books

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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, Kantio Belerion Orkas Belerion Orkas

Kantion, the blue tattoo of ridge-pines on a too-fa nentain, the paint of their war the lack of guest ethic, just the saltlick 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 len of the fence from shore to shore
rousing the twelve fair count against the armada fall of dity
Carthage Massalia Granerey 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 preses fine-art bògolanfini.. Sontrulhere 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?...


