

Nanos Valaoritis

Words of the Prow

What a splendid sea
 Writing itself on paper
 Masts, storms, islands
 Oars on the water line
 Whipping up the sea
 Cables anchors and lanterns
 Sway over the portholes
 I hear the enigmatic rumour of a whale
 Electric eels and morays down below
 Phosphorescent in the great deep
 Swarms of flying fish
 Performing pole leaps fall
 On the deck of the ship
 In the blood-stained sunset
 A triangular sail like a thorn
 Sharks stubbornly follow us
 The coral reef to the West
 Rises up tremendous
 With no passage anywhere
 A squall of wind lies in wait
 With peaks of petrified waves
 At dawn the wind bites the head
 Of a water spout with a hair of clouds
 We sink into a maelstrom of salt
 All this I understand, except this one:
 How did Alexander the Great
 Find himself wedded
 To a lady seal for a wife?

After many sheep herds of waves
 A dead calm surrounded us
 Nailed us down for a fortnight
 Lights of St. Nicholas on the masts
 Helens the Dioskouri and evil spirits
 Sponges breathe out their holy smoke
 From a bottomless chasm under the sea
 When we were little we made paper boats
 That sailed in the ditches
 From the shores of the Atlantic
 To the Sargasso Sea
 A phantom ship goes by
 King of the Caribbean
 Riding through storms
 That lance his sides
 Inside him meet
 Dark ministerial councils
 The octopus is prime minister
 The sky spills over with fluorine
 The Holy Spirit floods the tankers
 With vermilion reflections
 On the stern vampire corsairs

Roast a ginger cat
And the captain inscribes signs
With astrolabes and sextants
Planning his final
Journey to the stars
Heading for the Great Bear
The North Wind leaves his teeth-marks
On the mizzen mast
The midsail flaps
Tablecloths in the morning breeze
A rayfish throws a bunch of letters
In the bubbling waters
The angry Auster strikes the rudder
And turns it, the ship traces
A curve of 360 degrees.
Its smokestack rises
Until it reaches Alpha Centauri
The wind of the Virgin Mary
Swells the cheeks of the jibs
The masts creak the ship tilts
Pursued by the shadow of its fate...

What the devil we forgot to change
The black sail with the red one
Before dry land appeared;
And now watch it, the whole landscape
Evaporates into the heavens.