



The
BLUE
VOYAGE

AND OTHER POEMS

Anne French

*The tide is making; the breeze has turned
around the point, the lark sings
in the blue air. Nothing stays
the same. Everything is a variation
of the theme that goes on forever.*

The Blue Voyage and Other Poems is a new collection by Anne French – elegiac in tone and confident in execution. A more comic initial section (by noted New Zealand regional poet ‘William Butler Smith’) leads into a section of thoughtful but vivid sailing poems and then a number of elegies, laments and funeral songs from French’s ‘black notebook’. The final section voyages to Korea and includes some loose translations of poems by modernist Korean writer Han Yong-un. In their considerations of remembrance and writerly acts, these ‘translations’ aptly pick up themes introduced in the book’s first three parts and round off the book nicely: ‘Waiting / for the ringing of the bells announcing daybreak, / I put down my brush.’

Poet, publisher, singer, sailor and gardener **Anne French** is the author of a number of poetry collections with AUP including *Boys’ Night Out*, a finalist in the 1999 Montana New Zealand Book Awards, and *All Cretans Are Liars*, winner of the New Zealand Book Award for Poetry and the PEN Award for First Book of Poetry in 1988. French had an extensive career in publishing, with Oxford University Press and Te Papa Press, and currently works at the University of Auckland.

Whangaroa

Early morning, the dawn sky
a lighter shade of dark blue in the east
and the morning star shining.

I'm fed up with city life
I'm off up north for a while,
Doubtless Bay or Whangaroa,

somewhere I can have a garden:
scarlet runners, baby marrows;
get an old fridge to smoke kahawai

and worry about the varroa mite
getting into my beehives,
worry about my worm farm.

The sound of bees working the garden;
that's the life. I can hear them now,
humming like tyres on the main road.

At Lissadell

It was in the back bar I saw them,
the ladies' bar of an old hotel
that's too big for the town around it.
Somewhere in Central, was it? Gone now.
*Fallen down and left to the matagouri
and the frost, and the dry nor'wester.*

I'd been playing snooker half the day,
drinking and telling stories. Suddenly
there they were, two sisters, caught
in a shaft of evening light, as I looked
idly in on my way back from the Gents.
Silk dresses, all so dainty and fresh.

Gave me a shock to see them again
on Lambton Quay. Time has not been kind.
Not to me either, but somehow it's worse
for sheilas. Beautiful they were that day
in the Lissadell Hotel, and me stood
in the doorway, yawping and stammering.

One of them drove a red Chev Impala.
She went Green. Her sister I heard bats
for the other team. A crying shame.
And now they are both dead, the lovely girls,
*and the Lissadell has fallen down, left
to the frost and the dry nor'wester.*

Swannie

'Swannie, how I love ya, how I
love ya' counting out loud
the black shapes on the water.

Two dozen feathered rocks
floating on the cold tide.
You could always count on them.

Each year at the start of the season
they come. Up harbour, men
in swandris are taking aim

at whatever incautious
winged creature flies overhead.
Canada geese. Skeins of mallards

pointing towards winter. Me,
I'm crooning love songs to the swans
rootling around in the shallows

glad to see them back, as though
the world is still young
and admiration is all you need

for any woman to arch her neck
and preen herself under your gaze.
No fool like an old fool. *Swannie!*

The blue voyage

for Murat

i

How your face lit up, explaining
the blue voyage to me, its history,
how the tirhandil is rigged, the wind
that builds in the afternoon
so you must move in the morning
or at night. 'Like the meltemi?'
'Exactly. The meltem.' And then:
'It is very famous, the blue voyage.
I would like to do that myself one day.'

Looking back on that sunny conversation
I can see a flicker cross your face,
like the shadow cast briefly on the waves
by a bird flying low to catch the lift,
and just as swiftly pass. 'Drink water
with your rakı; one thing you must try:
midye dolması; Marmaris is an interesting
city.' The advice keeps coming. I learn
more words: çay, kahve, meze, şarap.
And now you must read the history.

ii

Turkish faces. Gurkman, waiting for the cones,
his quick dark clever face. Osman, big, handsome,
deft, taking our lines on the pontoon;
smiling his million-dollar smile: Osman
of the Golden Teeth. 'Welcome to my village!'
his arms spread wide. Ebru, that competent

strong young woman. The dealer in Ottoman antiques, small, dapper, urbane. The café owner in the covered bazaar who should be in movies; the plasterer so handsome he'd make Adonis look ordinary. Tall Turks with pale faces. The waiter in Bozburun, with his peaked cap and his tan; his hair curly as a Greek statue. And the 'Arab gentleman'; tall, copper-coloured, sent by Casting for the part of the overseer of the slave dhow, a cigarette carelessly burning in one hand, inches from the silk embroideries.

iii

The meltem. The first afternoon it comes in as soon as I surface from my dive, ruffling the water, darkening the smooth sea.

Soon we are punching into it; bright waves; two reefs in the main and a sliver of jib. An hour of that until I suggest we turn

and slide into Selimiye. The next afternoon it builds as we round Simi, a hefty 30 knots in the gusts, dead on the nose. The Turkish

navy steams past, right on the Greek border. Hours later we haul up Datça; first the wind farm east of the town, then at length the port.

We anchor in the bay and watch the last rind of sun illuminate the old Customs building. The Turkish flag whips red in the stiff breeze.

Soon we will row ashore in the dinghy, looking for dinner. But now it is time

to rinse the salt off our faces, eat dried olives,
enjoy the failing breeze, the new moon rising.

iv

Wildflowers. Durrell lists cistus as a flower
of early spring on Rhodes, but it is still flowering
in May in Datça: lemon-yellow, pale purple,
gracing dry hillsides and waste ground.
In the pocket park, five Queen of the Night,
lantana, rosemary, a phoenix palm
and a Tahitian hibiscus, carefully chosen;
elsewhere scarlet poppies, pink oleander,
figs in every cranny, vivid bougainvillea.
On the bumpy road to Knidos
wild cistus and foxgloves on rocky banks,
olive groves, almond orchards, pine forests,
beehives just below the mountain top
to work the forest for pine honey,
and bright red geraniums in the village.

v

The slender cats. In Palamutbükü,
said Ebru, there is a plague of cats.
You must close the boat up against them,
lest you should sail away with one as crew.
But we do not visit Palamutbükü.

In Bozburun, in Datça, in Selimiye,
eight green eyes watching every bite,
waiting under the table for my hand.
I do not heed the angry waiter.
I feed each hungry mouth.

vi

Scirocco. Fallstreaks from
tomorrow's weather. Something
has scribbled its name on the sky.
For now, a perfect evening; glassy sea,
the light fading. And then a halo
around the moon; the clouds moving.
Tomorrow, a stiff breeze from the south
full of desert sand, building,
building to a full gale.

vii

Yeniçeri. From Florida, you send
a photograph. Your son, one
upturned face in a sea of green
gowns, his dark eyes burning.
Later, you tell me the price:
if he wants to live in Turkey,
to reclaim his inheritance,
he must serve in the army.
The nation that invented
janissaries does not hesitate.

viii

Who imprisoned
Nâzım Hikmet
for twelve years?
Why should one red-
haired poet merit
such punishment?
And afterwards, why tear him
from his wife and infant son?

What purpose was served
by his exile?

ix

In Taksim Square the children
gather to protest. Called like birds
they stand to account, to protect
the trees from progress.

In itself

this is progress. Recall your youth:
the hail of bullets, the beatings.

Torture. Your own loss
of innocence; how it propels
you through the world
to do your best and more;
more, and then some.

For the sake of your father.

For the sake of the dead.

And now one dead Kurd.

And now the standing man.

This is not reasonable;
neither the children who gather
in Taksim Square; nor you;
but it is necessary.

x

Bencik Koyu. On the last day
the sun has never shone more sweetly.

Herodotus called it a defensive canal
dug by Knidos against the Persians,

but on a day of sun and breeze
it looks as though God made it
to break the hearts of all visitors.

The afternoon light falling
like orange-scented honey.

Across the Gulf, mountains;
one flag snapping scarlet in the wind.

xi

Yine beklerim. Only minutes left.
I embrace Ebru, whose name
means the dyeing of cloth,
look into her beautiful face
and tell her I shall return.

Rainy England is waiting,
green and damp and cool.
How can I leave all this?

The roses, the oleander,
the sunshine, the mountains,
the water full of little fish,

the perfect sailing breeze,
the warm welcome?
Ebru says: 'I am waiting.'

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