RAN ORTNER

Open Water no. 17, 2009
oil on canvas, 84 x 108 in.

courtesy: Ran Ortner studios

ALAN CHEUSE

On Board the S.S. Lincoln

First Night Out of Shanghai

He had no appetite, just a faint touch of upset, and loneliness, and untethered disappointment. He finally hauled himself up on deck. And as the ship heaved with the deepening swells, and hoved down, and heaved again, and hoved, he gazed up at the heavens and imagined that instead of looking up he was looking down, viewing a vast well of water, dashed with as many stars as grains of sand or specks of pepper from a pepper mill. Beneath—or "above"—this immensity, he felt like nothing and everything, no one and everyone, knowing all time and only a point of an instant, he had been born and he had kissed and he had nothing but memories of mother and lovers, of days and nights, a traveler who had covered great distances and yet gone nowhere, and he thought of the turning earth beneath him in flight, and the earth itself a ship that carried all of them, all earth and seas, all skies and even the moon tagging along behind it like a child's balloon on a long (invisible) string.

His dreamy state increased with the motion of the swells. The constellations beckoned, and he made out those known to him, inventing new ones, to go along with his recent (re)reading, the *Onegin*, and *Childe Harolde*, *The Lorelei*, everything he knew as well, airplanes and ships, even the one on which he now steamed along, and his mother and brothers and sister, the town where he grew up, Leningrad and Hakodate, Shanghai in the heavens, all these places found counterparts in the upper spheres, not merely mirroring those forms but transporting all of them, and all who lived there in those locations to a place where, as the Christians sometimes put it, at the right hand of God all found a life beyond life, their fate being to glitter in starry light and power. Oh, and wouldn't it be lovely if it were true? That nothing he, or anyone else, did went to waste, not a sip of water or a mile traveled, or a single slice of bread denied its fateful importance in the long path that led from this body on earth to those bodies in the heavens.

Fellow Passengers

Six cabins, seven passengers.

Philip was not the only Russian, but certainly the only Jew.

There was a young Japanese man, pale-skinned, slender, who moved lithely as if out of a Japanese dance. An elderly Chinese man traveling with a younger Chinese woman, whether father and daughter or old lover and young lover he could not tell. A young American woman, with reddened cheeks, who glanced shyly away when he looked at her—something odd about her—or did she think that he was odd? Finally, a dour man in his forties who smoked cigarette after cigarette but did not speak, decidedly Russian in his cheaply made suit and glowering stare.

This last person made Philip nervous, this man who seemed drenched in the sweat of the security organs.

But after an initial day of solitude, Philip made an effort to be civil with everyone at meal time, except for the Russian. Fortunately he had learned French and German at the Academy, and in the past year

You could not grow up in Russia without thinking that nothing happened by accident.

he had picked up some Japanese and Chinese. His English had also advanced a bit—a tiny bit—because of his talks with the embassy officials and the Sassoon girl. He could certainly exchange pleasantries with the three Asians. The American girl remained a question. She had light blonde hair, and a sweet smile, though her eyes, when she allowed them to settle on him, seemed dark and deep.

At the dinner table that night he gestured with his fingers—walking them like little people across the table—and she gave him a curious nod.

"At sunset?" Philip said.

She shook her head.

"I don't…understand," she said in halting Russian.

He held up his watch and pointed to the seven o'clock hour.

She showed her indifference with a shrug.

Philip had never before seen a woman make such a gesture. He did not know what to make of it. Must be a misunderstanding.

That night, he strolled the deck alone. Alas, the only person he encountered, moving in the opposite direction along the rail, was the Russian, the one person with whom he could speak freely but whom he did not wish to engage in any conversation.

He merely nodded to the man, and the man nodded back.

You could not grow up in Russia without thinking that nothing happened by accident. But if the man were a political commissar—Philip's greatest fear at the moment—how could he have known about Philip's voyage? Was there a spy in the American Embassy who passed along such information to the Russians? That could be, that could be. Or had Mr. Sassoon turned his name over to the Russians? So was the man then traveling to keep him in sight? Philip remembered the words of the old émigré in Hakodate. The price of an airplane came steep in Stalin's somber Russia.

Finger to the skull. Boom! In the mathematics of the Soviet Union the equation was simple. One airplane = one life. But in the new mathematics of Philip's current life, one steamship = freedom.

His second time around the deck the man was gone, gone below, no doubt, though Philip toyed with the notion that he had fallen overboard—or, worse, that he himself might throw the man overboard if he encountered him again.

The Moon, Red Mars, a Distant Volcano

Clear day, gazing at the horizon and the sky. Japan to the north, and later rising out of the east, as large a moon as he had ever seen. Up out on deck a good part of the night, watching the lunar globe swell and thicken, seeing faces on its surface, imagining a rocket that might carry him there, and even beyond, these fantasies out of his childhood born out of the reading of *Aelita*, and other books, when the red planet revealed itself before a false horizon of fog. Yes, here came red Mars rolling higher above the dark where the horizon lay hidden in the night, touched only by the light of the large lamp of the moon, though the glowing planet faded a little as the moon rose higher, and shrank in girth, and the wind picked up, and Philip felt chilled, in body, mind and soul, and he went below, secured a blanket from his cabin, and went up top again, to sleep beneath the moon.

He awoke to see the young Japanese passenger standing at the rail with a telescope pressed to his eye.

"What are you doing?" Philip said (which sounded like "Vat are you doink?").

The young man lowered the telescope, turned to him, and pointed toward the sea.

"Aogashima!" he said. "Aogashima!"

Philip raised himself up, but saw nothing except the lightly heaving waters just now becoming a visible texture of undulating sheen as the sun hiked up over the eastern horizon.

The young Japanese fellow handed him the spyglass.

"Wook!" he said.

"Wook?" Philip said.

"Volcano," the young man said.

"Ah," Philip said, pressing the glass to his eye and allowing the man to guide the instrument toward the distant horizon where, with the aid of the telescope, he discovered a dark speck beneath the new light of the rising sun.

"Volcano," the man said at his ear. "Volcano."

On the Free Crossway of the Sea

Philip's stomach still felt a bit queasy, so he refrained from appearing for regular meals, keeping to himself, those first couple of balmy days on deck, with the surface of the ocean as slick as a field of new ice, though undulating slightly under the intense heat of the sun at noon.

Happy to be alone, with a cup of tea and a few slices of toast, reading his favorite verses again, from the packet of books the émigrés in Hakodate had given him: *Eugene Onegin*.

Will the hour of my freedom come?
'Tis time,'tis time! To it I call;
I roam above the sea, I wait for the right weather,
I beckon to the sails of ships.
Under the cope of storms, with waves disputing,
on the free crossway of the sea
when shall I start on my free course?
'Tis time to leave the dreary shore
of the element inimical to me,
and 'mid meridian ripples
beneath the sky of my Africa,
to sigh for somber Russia,
where I suffered, where I loved,
where I buried my heart…

And now and then setting the book down on his lap, gazing along the sharp line that marked where the sea ended and the sky began, wondering if he was more like Onegin rather than Lensky, or if he had parts of both of these characters, one the wise, the other the innocent, within himself.

A large cloud passed before the face of the sun, a cloud shaped like a cliff, with a waterfall, and then, as it shifted and changed in the winds at that altitude, it became a bird, and then slowly turned into a camel, and then a shield, nearly heart-shaped in its essence.

And he took a deep breath, and then another, and returned to the book, holding on for dear life as he did when his ship went down in the Sea of Japan.

All behind him now! A volcano now behind him, too.

Pushkin! Russia! Mother! Eve!

Bold brave pilot crying out silently for help!

A Minor Event

Though the next day began with a peachy streaking of cirrus clouds that caught on their undersides, like some freshwater fishes turning their bellies toward the light as they maneuvered in a broad but shallow river—the first glimmers of the rising sun—within minutes things began to change. The bright streak of color turned bruised, then dark, the way a piece of fruit you have been saving for a late day treat will between morning and afternoon turn grey with signs of rot. By late morning the breeze blew warm but strong from that same portion of the sky. The deck crew checked ropes, chains, pulleys. By mid-afternoon, though many hours of day remained, a certain gloomy cast

hung above the ship, and the seas through which it passed rose higher and higher along the bow.

Other passengers he saw looked at him and each other with worried glances. Near sunset—almost a theoretical notion since low clouds had already gathered so thickly behind them that it seemed as though night had already fallen—on the horizon they saw true darkness looming directly ahead like an iceberg made of the worst dark fears any of them could conjure up and as immense almost as the entire eastern sky.

At supper the ship began slightly to shudder, sending up a constant chatter of plates and silver and glasses in the shelves and on the tables. People chatted nervously, their teeth on edge. One by one they disappeared from the mess, returning to their cabins for the miseries of a long torment. Philip sat a while, trying to tune his body to the vibrations of the approaching storm. Eventually he gave up and returned to his cabin, hoping to write in his notebook before things got too rough.

He added a few pages, riding the rise and near-shattering fall of the ship in tormented passage through the night as he might have suffered in the air in turbulence, fearing, despite knowing the opposite was true, that it might never end. At first light, curled up in his tiny cabin in the dark, the nose-burning stink from the toilet curling its way across the short distance to the bunk, he rolled with the ship, shuddered with it, as the waves of what a crewman he encountered on the way to the railing to vomit up his dinner had called a minor event. Himself he felt as though he had lived through a literal event that had become a metaphor for everything—storm, fear, change—transpiring in his soul.

Himself he felt as though he had lived through a literal event that had become a metaphor for everything—storm, fear, change—transpiring in his soul.

Worst and Best

After the storm, the sea calmed down considerably. Walking at night on the shifting deck, everything strange and dream-like in the light from the few pale lamps on the superstructure of the ship, he now and then suffered a slight feeling of apprehension. When you could see all space around you, the earth below, you knew where you were, but alone on deck in the middle of the ocean you could be overcome, if only momentarily, with profound disorientation.

Especially when walking to the stern and staring beyond the churning of the ship's large screw at the endless turbulence of the water passing behind them into the dark, his insignificance bore down on him. All that he had left behind was passing further away. Leaning on the rail he stared at the turbulent wake.

Come in! Come!

The voice sounded in his ear like his mother's sweet voice, though he knew it was the devil within him, whatever force that was, calling him to end it all right then and there.

"To hell with you!!" he shouted into the ever-receding whirls of the waves. He did not know where he was going, but he was traveling there no matter what!

That was the worst part of walking on deck at night.

The best—of course it was the stars, which he could see in all of their profusion as a spray of millions upon millions of pinpoint lights above the absolute darkness of the ocean horizon. Instead of making him feel insignificant beyond insignificance, the splash of tiny lights that painted the entire space beyond and above the decks gave him hope such as he had never known in his life except that when, in those moments of lifting off from the earth, he could feel his freedom as a wild and electric rushing like a current through his body.

If he, and men like him, could fly even a few feet above the ground it meant that in a century or a thousand years, or perhaps a thousand thousand, they would, or his descendents, in any case, be hurtling toward those near stars and far. Say that each of these stars stood for an instant in his life, or the life of anyone else. Time, whether a year, or a thousand years, or a million, would eventually allow either him or those who came after him to put them all in order and tell the story of space as a continuation of the story of earth.

These the earnest drifting thoughts of an optimistic, even idealistic young man who had flown several thousand feet above the ground, now standing on deck beneath the dark, night sky, a young man trying to hold himself together while consumed with stars, the ship on which he traveled moving forward into eastward-tending currents where the light-drenched night sky invited it, the ocean being itself temporarily calm, the earth turning on its axis, the planet pulled along by the magnetic force of the sun, the entire galaxy drifting in tune to the incomprehensible music of all that was out there and all that sounded from within.

Alan Cheuse is the author of *Song of Slaves in the Desert*, which has just appeared in a paperback edition, *The Light Possessed*, and, among other novels, the award-winning *To Catch the Lightning*. As a book commentator, Cheuse has been a regular contributor to National Public Radio's *All Things Considered* since 1982. His short fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Boston Globe Sunday Magazine*, *The Southern Review*, *The Antioch Review*, and elsewhere. His latest work is a trio of novellas, *Paradise, or, Eat Your Face*.