Crossing the Red Sea

1
Many slept on deck
Because of the day's heat
Or to watch a sunset
They would never see again –
Stretched out on blankets and pillows
Against cabins and rails:
Shirtless, in shorts, barefooted,
Themselves a landscape
Of milk-white flesh
On a scoured and polished deck.

Voices left their caves
And silence fell from its shackles,
Memories strayed
From behind sunken eyes
To look for shorelines –
Peaks of mountains and green rivers
That shared their secrets
With storms and exiles.

2
1949, and the war
Now four years dead –
Neither masters nor slaves
As we crossed a sea
And looked at red banners
That Time was hoisting
In mock salute.

3
Patches and shreds
Of dialogue
Hung from fingertips
And unshaven faces –
Offering themselves
As a respite
From the interruption
Of passing waves.

'I remember a field
Of red poppies, once behind the forest
When the full moon rose.'

'Blood
Leaves similar dark stains –
When it runs for a long time
On stones or rusted iron.'

(And the sea's breath
Touched the eyes
Of another Lazarus

Who was saying a prayer
In thanksgiving
For miracles)

4
All night
The kindness
Of the sea continued –
Breaking into
Walled-up griefs
That men had sworn
Would never be disclosed,
Accepting outflung denunciations
With a calmness
That brought a reminder
Of people listening to requiems,
Pine trees whispering
Against a stone wall in the breeze;
Or a trembling voice
That sang at the rails
When the ship first sailed
From the sorrow
Of northern wars.

5
Daybreak took away
The magic of dreams,
Fragments of apparitions
That became
More tangible than words –
Echoes and reflections
Of the trust
That men had bartered
For silence.

Had we talked
Of death
Perhaps something
More than time
Would have been lost.

But the gestures
Of darkness and starlight
Kept our minds
Away from the finalities
Of surrender –
As they beckoned towards
A blood-rimmed horizon
Beyond whose waters
The Equator
Was still to be crossed.