

Barbarian Warship

Black gouts of smoke climb ninety coiling feet
 Like some dark dragon writhing into flight.
 Winds blow in vain. Our helmsman, like his deckhands,
 Brought up all standing, goggle at the sight.

That, so I tell them, that's a western warship
 Bearing away towards our native shores.
 Note the tall mast, so high it scrapes the zenith:
 Note how she holds her heading and ignores
 Our wind-turned tacking through the compass-rose:
 Note the thick smoke-whirl boiling from her stack
 And how those two great paddle-wheels beat down
 The unruliest wave that lifts to turn them back.

Unhelped by sails, by oars, by any tow-crew,
 Nimble as some spry horse she puts about
 Now port, now starboard, dainty as a cat's-paw
 Yet no less lethal than a waterspout.
 Making an hundred leagues in one day's steaming,
 She'll pass the Caves of Blood, in one watch more
 Loom off the Dragon's Mouth. Through fifty-footers
 She'll plough to belch foul smokes on Singapore.

Down White Rock Strait the tides run fast and choppy
 But, lounging round their mast in white duck trews,
 Her sailors hail our lads and wag round hats
 As though they brought old friends long-needed news.

"Strangers ahoy," I bellow in the hope
That such sea-sharks might yet be warned away,
"Beware the Burning Rocks, not far ahead,
Islands whose fires, flung up like so much spray,
Shrivel the very sun. And, be you bound
Easterly hence, be mindful that, beside
The rip-tides that await you, the worst water
Ever the west has spawned is half a tide."

They wave their hats, and shout. Barbarian noises.
And we rock in their wake, forewarned and terrified.

Cao Ba Quat (1809 - 1853)
Translated from the Vietnamese by Graeme Wilson