

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 hove down, and heaved again, and hove, 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 Harold*, *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