

Reading Patrick O'Brian

Ships of the line play cat and mouse, then race
under a press of sail across the main,
which glitters beautifully and slaps and sways
against the walls of oak, an azure plain
that's marbled with great swirls of wind and tide.
I close it up and put it to one side.

I put it to one side and lift my head
back up into the air where trees once leant
and stretched in all directions, the branches spread
green spandrels far across the continent.
The noise of cannon and small skirmishes
just now so deafening diminishes

into the complex noise of streets, a city
in a state without a single shore,
its speed and grime, the endless nitty-gritty
to-and-fro across the trading floor
through which I hear the throat-clearing croak
of some old salt who'll sing out "Heart of Oak".