

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".