

# New Vessels

a poem by Sen McGlinn

*The thread in the hand of a kind mother  
is the coat on the wanderer's back.  
Before he left she stitched it close  
In secret fear he would be slow to return*

*Meng Chiao*



The declining side of evening,  
when light is trapped and bleeding,  
and swifts' erratic scissors cut the sky  
over the darkening mangrove flat.

*The hills as heavy as skulls.*

The thunderous moans of the night  
grumble across the grassland.  
They peer over trees, that have turned to coal,  
go in fear of the hunting Moriori.

Who thrusts her chin forward, to be sure,  
and stands on tip-toe for the kiss?  
I mark the pressure of your breast  
on ribs as lean as the young pea's pod  
Although I sit here, am alone,  
at the corner of a window's eye,  
*watching.*

A hull lies, black among bounders  
The crayfish walks with exact toes  
into the sheltering wound.  
The gully that I cleared last year  
is troubled with new growth.

And now I try to understand  
the vortex of the fallen leaves  
whirling under water  
from the grand Pohutukawa  
to the floor of feeding harbour,

how the crayfish leaves her shell,  
how fortunate the hermit dwells,

the feeling of the almost grasped

that slithers in a poem,  
the softening of the vertebrae,  
and how the mortals learn to pray.



Wherever two or three are gathered  
footfalls echo  
down the passage which we did not take,  
towards the door we never opened.



Two or three o'clock,  
the strands of time  
gather to a clasp.

*Dies irae, dies illa.*

You start from sleep  
with stomach turned queasy from fright;  
like an axe blasting chunks from the standing trunk  
anxiety chops in your chest:  
a threat un-named, but like th'unresting dog  
your troubled mind explores  
the acrid odours of the street  
at the corners of silent doors.

Is it greed, or war, or the sliding apart of houses?  
Is it the brimstone escaped from the chapel?  
The odour refuses.

Somewhere the small boys are sniffing cocaine,  
somewhere the rapist works in the rain  
with his raincoat slapping his buttocks,  
the flowers of evil turn to fruit  
and the stench is choking repose.

The bantam clucks in the scratching corn:  
back in the run the white eats her eggs.  
Old tyres on the rubbish fire  
smoke in the greasy air.  
Easy by little the creek turns foul;  
dead fish glide past, the falling tide:  
who can guess the first day  
when the ocean starts to stink?

I'll never forget the muted fall of day  
through the apricot drapes of the window bay  
on the morning I told my first lie to my first lover  
and how she smiled her gratitude  
and let the light lie on her thighs;  
never forget the smell of the moving crowd  
all the helmets like china eggs,  
and truncheons lift and drop quick  
like chickens picking corn;  
or the grain of the lovely Kauri  
where I knelt for absolution,  
and the granite blow of sunlight  
when we, shuffling, reached the door  
and the canon shook me by the hand.

Easy absolutions, granted in the dark,  
evasions, and pollutions, and the sliding apart,

the sliding apart of houses  
and leaning into the dark.



Lovers lie apart:  
the night's unrest apart,  
breathing in and breathing out.  
The cavity of the chest  
aches under pressing stone,  
the hills are as heavy as skulls.  
Stressed bones constrain the hooked arch there.  
In shadow, at the edge of night,  
the keystone bleeds.  
Anger's geography, bedrocked in distance.

Apart, the night's unrest apart,  
breathing in and breathing out,  
while the heart's stone shell in frozen action  
is seen imploding perpetually in  
and repeats  
in mechanic looped sequence.

Breathing in and breathing out  
we lie apart, slack-fleshed and far too sane  
to start again to turn the boulder in the bed.

Breath held 'till the sternum burns  
(the diver rising to the light  
led by the bubble of his buoyant breast),  
breath held 'till the chest almost parts  
gasps at last out  
and the dust of the lungs goes too.

*" .. Each moment ...  
Is but a quiet watershed,  
Whence, equally, the seas of life and death are fed"*



The Amazon and Orinoco basins are linked by the Casiquiare Canal, from whose highest point, if it could be detected, water presumably flows in two directions.



The geography of change begins  
where change is barely visible,  
a zone of shadow at the edge of night.

Between the shallow catchments  
of the Amazon and Orinoco  
the Casiquiare's natural canal  
trembles on a watershed  
where any breath  
in the breathless spongy jungle  
could start the balance.

A hair-line in the black water  
from which the current slips away;  
one particular period in which  
the great Casiquiare begins to slide  
over the watershed and down  
to its several waiting mouths,  
like the python that lies digesting  
motionless its meal until  
at a certain critical level of repletion  
the eyelids rise and the great coils  
begin to flow, beautifully  
to a certain end.

Some kind of change has occurred:  
one hair, laid on the water, begins to drift  
and the watcher thinks of the sea.

Humbolt and Bonplaud continued their journey on the river by canoe as far as the Orinoco. Following its course and that of the Casiquiare River they proved that the Casiquiare River formed a connection between the vast river systems of the Amazon and the Orinoco. For three months Humbolt and Bonplaud moved through dense tropical forests, tormented by clouds of mosquitoes and stifled by the humid heat. Their provisions were soon destroyed by insects and rain; the lack of food finally drove them to subsist on ground-up wild Cacao beans and river water. Yet both travellers, buoyed up by the new and overwhelming impressions, remained healthy and in the best of spirits.

(Encyclopaedia Britannica.)

My heart-beat  
is your foot-falls  
in the hallway.

I cannot hear my  
heart  
beat.  
I cannot hear your coming home.

Touch yourself,  
above the collarbone.  
Just there,  
your palpable approach.



*What rocks, what islands, what drained flats.  
Never weather-beaten sail  
more weary bent to shore  
than I on the high white bed,  
garboard leaking, lean towards  
what? A nurse to tend incontinence.  
Whitecaps in the failing day like scraps of sail --  
the eyes of the watch burn through.*

The still Casiquiare  
lies waiting, breathless.

*Cushioned shoes on shining floors  
and whispering in corridors  
when these young visit.*

*Now worse, to have no flail to start  
the pious silence but strait memories  
sour on a smothered tongue.  
Some kind of change has occurred --  
talk of a new order, oriental names,  
what shall I curse?  
I fish for air with hooked breath  
and heart all barbs.*

*My bones creak like hawsers under strain,  
a voice like boulders, and a breath  
that rattles like a running chain.*

(Leaves, whirling under water, form  
the senseless litter of the harbour floor.)

*Snow held, then, into November.  
Trees, unfurling on the plain, whispered  
while winter lay still on the high stone bed.  
The heirs of spring are planning the planting --  
these young have no sense of the proprieties.*

Between Amazon and Orinoc,  
the Casiquiare  
trembles on a watershed.

*Footfalls echo in the hallway.*

*Breathing in and breathing out.  
Hairs on the water, straws on the wind.*

*I was the bully boy then,  
friend to men that grew great.  
Betrayed, or were betrayed, or died.  
Here at the quiet limit of the world  
I look forward to nothing.  
Blind words in the land of the long grave hearts,  
what shall I pray?  
Talk of a new order,  
of hope, and new ships,  
sings of a language impending  
and names I cannot grasp.*

Casiquiare begins to slide.  
The hermit crab in the mangrove roots  
is scratching in the litter;  
in the gardens of the ocean  
through the door we never opened  
the crayfish gingerly  
disonnects.

*Nunc dimittis.*

*I look forward to nothing  
forward to nothing.*

*Old claws in a borrowed shell.*

**(You, with the bottoms of your trousers rolled!)**

*Prayer rumbles down corridors.*

*Death, old captain, raise anchor.*

*Talk of new order, new ships.*

*I saw new ships come sailing in*

*come sailing in*

*come sailing in ...*



The breath of lovers  
held 'till the chest almost parts  
gasps at last out  
and the dust of the lungs goes too,  
a Milky Way in a cloud of air,  
our liberation's constellations  
gasping, at last, out.

And breathing in;  
the air's graceful portion of given oxygen.  
Turn and find the loved-one's back  
is not, after all, of marble,  
and change is always possible.

And change is always possible:  
why not slowly under skies  
the wide world widely make our home,  
raise anchor and set white sails,  
leaving the anger-stone astern:  
read from the waves' one mesh  
the liturgy of union.

The sea that tongues the estuary of Sumner  
(and you, and I)  
cleans industriously the cliffs of Dover,  
curls 'round Humbolt and laps Japan,  
is one; the reaching, near, all-possible path.  
Let us build winged feet and go  
merrily on the globe.



Pray on the planks of ships unbuilt,  
three-masted, simple-sailed,  
and cavernous in the carrying hold.  
20,000 miles a year,  
50 years, a million miles,  
swilling her great belly 'round the waves  
laden with trade.

Can you see, here, how those new bronze nails  
with ringed barbs about the shank  
will sink from plank to rib and grip so tight  
the head is pulled within the swelling wood?  
Clenched tighter than a mortal grip on life  
that age relaxes. A good ship  
outlives us all,  
the future as light as the fall to earth  
of shavings from the breathing plane.

Let us build winged feet and go  
merrily on the globe;  
build me a fleet and rig it with sail  
vessels for going out.



*We stand at the parting of the ways.  
Whoever cannot encompass  
the great bounties that await us  
in this radiant century,  
let him now repair to his home,  
give up the journey.*

In the midst of the land a dark wood was growing  
but we have passed that way, this night  
somewhere by the road.  
At five the coach stopped  
and we walked around the corner  
of the Blue Pacific hotel,  
in that kind of grey light that's changing every minute,  
and there was an ocean, smack dab before.

In the dry corridors of the forest  
phosphorescent markers have appeared,  
scarlet and yellow in the shadow;  
They whisper: "Cut here," "Slice this,"  
or, "This may be cleared away."

Whoever cannot encompass  
the great bounties that await us  
let us employ him for wages  
to fell the dark wood and mill it for timber  
for the broad bellies of ships.



*Earth turns,  
inclines her axis,  
plough fields and snow fields  
groan and begin.*

*Earth turns, the river in the stars  
is gathering strength for the thaw,*

*she turns, and sap  
comes bombing out  
in fuzz-buds  
on the weeping willow,*

*and there's calves  
and lakes of milk  
and creeping and crawling  
under the stones.*

*The Buller is grinding its boulders again,  
mosquitoes are laying their eggs.  
The pines are wheeling  
their teeth on the ridge  
like sprockets across the stars.*

*The earth is revolving the old stately way  
the shell of the snail  
the bark of the tree  
in intimate secrecy  
for the new ring.*

*The crayfish gingerly  
disconnects  
walks with exact toes,  
out of her shell.*

*The ungainly gravid hind  
hunts a close gully  
to drop her fawn,  
I saw the flash of her rump-flares  
moving uncertainly  
into the regrowth.*



Mother, my boat is choking with fortune,  
in the chill morning riding  
the glacial make of a dead calm sea,  
floating on smoking water with masts as still  
as Sunday's steeple, and the blind rudder  
swinging as it will.

All night the flukey winds frustrate;  
four times I tack across and back  
against the decline of the tide  
but make no way, the miles of mirror  
stretch to city light that swim  
in some fabulous aquarium.

The gathering current in the stars  
that curls around the milky way  
(*and you, and I*)  
begins to slide,  
forms suddenly an alphabet,  
*chifro de klara lingvo*  
Sings in a common tongue,  
*en chiela civito*  
alchemical, complete.

At six, the wind ceased  
just at the turn of the tide.  
I find the flag to signal:  
"Vessel not under control"  
and slide down, at a knot, into Harbour.

*In the infinite universe  
everything occurs:  
somewhere a burnt-out brig is riding  
the current that gathers to Rigel.*

Mother, I remember how  
you stitched that old sail.  
Perversely in the winning day  
I keep it raised, a lubberly slack scandal,  
as the city groans to its feet and salutes  
with flashing mirrors the sun the sun  
burning the arch of arrival.