

Voyaging 1

*Sometimes,
the rock of the boat
is a swing, the soar up
and the plunge down, the bow
riding air and my heart
holding its breath
until the swoop and smash
as it hits the water,
spray surging and gushing,
like standing in a fountain
drenched and intoxicated,
your whole world running
with water.*

**Days of rain when the sky
is a palette of grey, soaking clouds,
full as a woman's flouncing skirts.
Trees disappear, crowns cancelled out
by lacy layers of mist and petticoat.
There are days when everything
is fabric, the stuff of dresses:
lace, cotton, silk, cambric, muslin.
Today the whole world disappeared,
the low island marking our passage
into this harbour, the reefs raining jewels
like the musical fountains at Versailles,**

the headlands and bluffs to east of here –
all gone! The frothing sky
swallowed it all: just rocks lifting
from the water's edge, sea grass
waving fingers in green shallows,
tree trunks, still as sleeping giants;
this voyaging out , a closing up,
a caving in, a smothering.

*Sometimes,
the rock of the boat
is a cradle, the roll and slide,
portside lifting as starboard sinks
beneath the wave, anything
unlashed become a weapon,
anything on a rope ready
to swing and strike, a blow
to maim or kill, the dip
enough to leave you wondering
about how deep,
how cold, how empty
this ocean is.*

The sea's changing face
is a hall of mirrors
catching the glint
and gleam of a dress
sewn with diamonds,

flashing and sparkling
as its wearer spins.
Here, in the shallows
its green weave
is silk from Nantes
or flooded meadow grass
or a long-stemmed glass
you lifted to your lips,
opaque and dense
with secrets.

*Sometimes,
I remember the Grand Canal,
its length and sweep
that seemed vast to me, the way
wind scudded the water
to small peaks, blowing spray in faces,
or the evenings when it was lit
with flame and boats paraded
sailing you to other worlds.
It was all a game: the canal was tiny,
the boats a sham. The music here
is the wind screaming
and my heart's terrified refrain.*

Wind drops
to a gentle hand
that lulls, quells;

I could sleep
in this stillness,
eyes drooping
in sensuous sun.
The faint breeze
stirs trees
to olive ribbons,
birds veer past,
sleek air machines,
their litany
of complaint
shearing
the blue air.

*Sometimes,
a bird haunts the ship,
its breast whiter than yours,
blank as the first snow, untrammelled
by prints, wings stretched
in an enormous arc,
wing tips bent, body skimming water,
effortlessly riding the wind,
sky, a grey blanket,
sea, cold metal,
the bird's white body
a beacon blazing its brilliance
in this bleak light.*

**I unburden myself
of all that ocean, drop it
like a cloak from my shoulders,
its heavy folds, a stone
that sinks without trace.
Something else emerges
from the rising and swelling,
the heave and pulse and motion:
into this utter stillness
I slip from the chrysalis,
limbs flexing, lungs expanding:
my shorn head, muscled arms
and sea legs belong to a new creature.
Watch me rise into this new world.
Watch me burn like a phoenix.**

Voyaging 2

the sea a blue furling tightly bound the sheets the cords strapped and
straining the ache the creak the holdfast as we leave the shore behind chaos
and an infinite sky the wind a benefactor its breath our battlefield the spilling
of fear we are awash with rain and sea it drums on our skin setting it alight
with liquid the sky a streaming thing a screaming thing haunted by bird call
by the wind lifting its throat widening its jaws its shifting embrace a body
blow that blasts the world asunder the past a mockery a flawed thing with
burnt claws the present an unknown show the performers' wigs askew their
voices deep as the bowels of the earth the rain a cloak a hiding place his tears
my tears washing changing charging all the particles of air alive and dancing
skin streaming the ship a chess piece moving step by step towards release
unease lifting the world firmer despite its watery foundations my shirt sleeves
soft against this toughening skin hide of a rhinoceros this body a chrysalis
from which I inch slow sure steady the astonishing blue a gleam in an eye the
sea aglow the sea a blue unfurling

Note:

These two poems reference the story of a French woman, Marie Girardin who spent most of her life in the town of Versailles where her father worked in service to the royal family in 1791. After the death of her baby son and her husband, and when the Revolution was underway, Marie Girardin dressed as a man and obtained the position of steward on d'Entrecasteaux's ship as part of the expedition searching for La Perouse. The expedition spent time at

Recherche Bay in 1792 and again in 1793, making Girardin the first European woman to sail in Tasmanian waters.