

Stewart McGowan

Come unto these yellow sands

A short, dystopian SF play

This play is copyrighted by Stewart McGowan. It is available for use in classroom settings without express permission. For performance rights, please contact the author at stewart.mcgowan@det.nsw.edu.au.

Come unto these yellow sands

By Stewart McGowan

CHARACTERS:

SAM Older, a survivor, hard-nosed and realistic. Confident in his/ her ability to sense trouble and respond.

CHRIS: Younger, high-spirited, adventurous but unskilled

JOE: A Trader on the iron barges, pragmatic and amoral

NOTES

The running time of the play is approximately 15 minutes

Some of this play is written in verse. It's meant to be spoken conversationally – the verse often runs over the end of lines. There are dialogue conventions, too. Bracketed words, (like this) are not meant to be spoken. Sometimes pauses are indicated by gaps in the verse, sometimes by ellipsis (...)

The title is a quote from The Tempest.

The play is deliberately gender neutral. Choose between he/ she where necessary.

Morse code signals are used in the play. The easiest way to do these is by turning on a torch, covering it with a hand and moving the hand to create short and long pulses.

ACT 1

A room on the top floor of the old Broadmeadow school, early evening. There are various pieces of broken furniture, an upturned bookcase, some books strewn around the room, a rickety table, some chairs. The room hasn't seen a class in five years but there are the remains of teaching paraphernalia. Piles of loose paper, broken rulers.

SAM enters, carrying a pack and a paddle. Worn clothes, an old hat – very much like an old swag. He/she props the paddle in a corner, takes out a tin of food and a plate and sets them on an old table. From behind a bookcase there comes an old blanket swag, which is spread on the ground. She props the paddle against the wall and looks around. From offstage there is a flash of distant light – short long. It is some distance off – a morse code signal. SAM takes a lamp from her bag and returns the signal. Short short short short long long long. There is a reply. Short short. SAM sits upstage – in the shadows and picks up an old book.

There is a sound of footsteps, hurrying. CHRIS enters, running from something, carrying an old chisel like a weapon. There is water dripping from clothes, mud on the face, a sodden

bag. CHRIS looks around, sees no-one in the room, then looks outside. Nothing. CHRIS slumps down against the wall, drops the chisel.

SAM: Where'd you find that?

CHRIS leaps up, grabs the chisel.

SAM: You been in one of the old woodwork rooms downstairs? Surprised there's any of them left. Most of 'em went years ago.

CHRIS: Stay back! (*SAM hasn't moved*)

SAM: Can't get any further back than this. You know that's not even sharp?

CHRIS: Are you a Trader?

SAM: Do I look like a Trader?

CHRIS: No...

SAM: It used to be a classroom, here it's still

a place to hide from those who'd take a life.

Broadmeadow, once they called this place. But now

the water swirls and sucks, flows hard at change

of tide.

CHRIS: I know! I had a house, but now...

SAM: So where you been? The stadium? The Hill?

CHRIS: Kotara. In the car park. In a wreck.

SAM: Alone?

CHRIS: I... (*used to share with someone – now*)

SAM: Yeah. I had someone once. But now they're gone.

CHRIS: The Iron Traders?

SAM: That's who's after you?

So who've you offended? Failed to pay?

CHRIS: I don't know! One minute I'm in a work crew, the next there's a group of them coming for me. Somehow I got over the edge, tide was down so it was only mud I had to get through – up the old entry ramp to my wreck, grabbed my bag and followed the drain line down.

SAM: You know how many try to swim the creek? Who think

they'll beat the tides, dodge the sharks?
I saw a bull shark hit the ferry once –
the rope one, near the flooded railway gates –
just floating logs, with men to pull it through.
The bull shark knocked a passenger clean off
and took his leg and ripped it foot to knee.
And Traders keep a lookout, know the tides
and watch for those who'd make it to the sea
to seek a better life.

CHRIS: I've seen this too.

Pause

SAM: Sam.

CHRIS: Chris.

SAM: Good to meet you. You got anything worthwhile in that bag? Just cooking up a feed.

CHRIS: I've got some books

SAM: Good. We'll start a fire later. (*CHRIS hugs his/her bag to him/her*) I'm kidding.

CHRIS: Sorry.

SAM: Don't say that.

CHRIS: What?

SAM: Don't say you're sorry.

CHRIS: ...

SAM: My father used to work here. Back before
the coal ran out, when power through the wires
was still a thing. And kids, instead of dropping
down like flies came here to read and talk.
Behind us, see? The building there? Its curve?
A railway roundhouse, Dad said, held the trains

that took the people North and South from here.

That's where we lived, until the waters rose

And then he said, I'm sorry. Wasted words!

CHRIS: I'm.... I just want to go somewhere... if I could... What do you know about the south?
Everyone says it's better there.

SAM: You know that glow you see in the south on clear nights? Well, when the lines went dead
some bright spark down south thought, you know what? Let's build some floating fortresses
that don't need coal or oil. We'll fit 'em out with reactors.

CHRIS: Are they the...

SAM: Yep, the Trader's ships, the Iron Barges. Well, some genius Trader thought, if I can get one
through the Swansea channel, up into the lake, I'll hook it up and get the grid to work! The
thing's got power to spare! I'll light the town. But he crashed it hard against the rocks. That
glow you see? It means the lake is closed. Don't go south. Dinner?

(SAM has been serving up the tin of food. CHRIS hesitates, but takes it)

CHRIS: Tinned food? Where'd you get that?

SAM: Same place as your chisel. Last century, when they built this place, they filled in a swamp. It
flooded early – people left a lot of stuff behind. Didn't think they'd need it.

*Offstage, a light flashes. Short, Long, short long (ETA). SAM picks up the torch and returns
the signal. Long short long long. (Y)*

CHRIS is suddenly wary.

CHRIS: Who's that?

SAM: It's Joe, over at the stadium. He's got a better view downstream than me. I'm good
upstream. Tide's full but there's no Traders in the ditch. He sent 'ETA' – Empty of Traders, A.
I'm A. I sent Y – yes. Should be safe for the night now.

CHRIS: Batteries? Where'd you get them.

SAM: Rechargables. Solar cell on the roof.

CHRIS: Be a lot easier if we still had mobiles.

SAM: What do you know about mobiles?

CHRIS: One of my wreck crew had the book for one. Said she'd found it in an old store in the
basement. Really strange. Had all of these instructions about games, numbers...

SAM: I used to play with one when I was a kid.

CHRIS: You that old?

SAM: Guess I am. How's your food?

CHRIS: Good. (*Points at the tin*) A lot easier than catching it. Not as tough as dog, either.

SAM: Nothing's as tough as dog.

CHRIS: Give me a good bit of snake any day. (*They laugh. It's a grim joke.*)

So Sam, where would you go?

SAM: North. Tomaree.

CHRIS: North? I heard...

SAM: You heard wrong.

The west's no good. The river's too exposed
the swollen current unpredictable,
the eddies filled with desp'rate folk who'd skin
you for the leather on your back. The hulks –
the dreadful overflow of people scorn'd

....

CHRIS: Sam?

SAM: The west's no good. I know.

(SAM takes from his/her bag a cheap ornament. With his back to CHRIS he looks at it, remembering someone lost, then slides it carefully back into the bag)

CHRIS: I'm sorry.

SAM: I told you not to say that!

CHRIS: Well what should I say? Who died and made you King/ Queen of the Swamp? You lost someone! Well so did I! So have we all!

SAM: (*Turning on CHRIS*) Full fathom five thy father lies

Of his bones are coral made

Those are pearls that were his eyes

Nothing of him that doth fade...

CHRIS: What?

SAM: It's a book. Here! (*He throws an old book at him/her*)

CHRIS: *The Tempest?*

SAM: It means a storm. Not a normal bloody ‘make life damper in the lowlands’ storm. A shitstorm. The one that lifts your house clean off its piers and floats it out to sea.

CHRIS: I don’t get it.

SAM: We all die but some of us do better than dying in some shitty mudhole digging out an old car body from the past so we can cut it up and use the metal. Or in some pointless fight over a bridge or a crossing, or firewood left on the high tide line, or who’s working for who. If you run, you can die – but it’s a better death.

He looks at CHRIS. He’s worked out part of the mystery

SAM: Where is he/she?

CHRIS: Who?

SAM: ... (*you can’t fool me. I know you’re looking for someone you love*)

CHRIS: I don’t know. North. There’s so little to go on.

SAM: You’d better.. (*hope it’s the North*)

Flashes again: S (short short short).

Traders! Coming in against the tide. (*turning on CHRIS*) Who are you? What makes you so important they’d come against the tide?

CHRIS: I don’t know! I haven’t.. Help me, please!

SAM: What’s in it for me?

(*CHRIS reaches into the bag and carefully removes something wrapped in a piece of cloth, unwraps it. It is a bottle of wine*)

You bloody idiot. No wonder they’re chasing you. Have you any idea what this is worth?

CHRIS: Enough to get me on a barge, to get me up the coast! To get me North. And I’ll give it to you for that! (*He points at the paddle*)

SAM: I could just take it

CHRIS: But you won’t.

SAM: (*throwing the paddle*) Don’t take the main channel. Head round to the left – the channel’s small and fast, you’ll need to work. Good luck.

CHRIS: ... (*grabs the bag and runs*)

SAM smiles, goes back to the corner, clears the plates from dinner, picks up the book again. From offstage there is the sound of a struggle, CHRIS fighting to escape from someone else.

The noise stops abruptly. CHRIS has been knocked unconscious by his assailant. SAM seems unperturbed. He reads from the book:

SAM: 'But this rough magic I here abjure, and deeper than did ever plummet sound, I'll drown my book'. G'day, Joe.

JOE enters. He is carrying the paddle.

JOE: How'd you know it was me, Sam?

SAM: ...

JOE: Fair enough. Ta for the tip-off. Should be a good worker, that one. Got a barge heading to the Swansea clean-up in the morning. That's chewing up the workforce, that mess. What's that? *(indicates the wine)*

SAM: Price of a paddle. Want a glass?

JOE: ... *(you're joking. Of course I do!)*

SAM: Don't know why I even asked. *(He pours an inch of the valuable wine into two mugs as he speaks).* You took your time. Had to share my dinner, tell the poor bugger how the world is. Hey, where's my pay?

JOE: As promised. These are getting harder to come by, too.

(from the bag comes a packet of cable ties. They are thrown to SAM)

What do you want with them?

SAM: Got a trade on. Up on the Hill.

JOE: City people, eh? No idea. World changes around 'em and they hang onto the past and dream about the times when wi-fi was a thing and the world wasn't knee-deep in shit.

SAM: No idea, Joe. No effing idea.

(They touch their cups and drink. Blackout)

END