

Runner Up

GONE TO SEA

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The fishing boats welcomed all outcasts with open gantries.

They did not board with any sense of purpose, but to escape the crud and debris, social expectation and insufferable *morality* of land-life.

Better to be a fish out of water, as it were.

Be you deadbeat, vagabond, gangster, fraud. Fugitive, hooligan. Poet.

Murderer.

Such labels may be given to the grounded, but here conscience becomes hazy and the slate remains unquestioned - wave-wiped clean and scoured with salt.

No, a man didn't board the trawlers with an agenda, but this kid was certainly after something. Rob could see it, if he looked. He could see it in the eyes.

Rob liked to assert his authority by feinting violence towards new crew members – throwing his weight around with flailing fists just to scare them a bit, knock them off kilter. At the time, the kid had stiffened, bracing himself for the blows, but Rob backed off.

Not out of cowardice, mind, nor any particular respect; remorse.

Rob pretended to ignore the steely resolve in the kid's expression – the glint of Paris reflected in his eyes.

His eyes betrayed his dreams. To travel, and explore, to venture out into a great and terrible unknown and try to make something of himself there.

This kid was going places.

Not that Rob cared. He simply couldn't be arsed beating up a skinny adolescent looking for work experience.

At eighteen, Rob himself had been binging, blazed, broke. Bugged.

What was this kid's deal? Why not stay put, stay sane, stay *something*? Live hard, die young, become a statistic. One who drank and danced and crashed motorbikes, stacking credit and making fools of themselves just because they could. Invincible, until they weren't.

But this bloke had denied himself the shiny car and law degree to play Sinbad the Sailor. This bloke was not a statistic.

Earlier, Rob had sent the kid up to the crow's nest to scout for prawn deposits. On a clear day you could tell where the schools were by the silt clouds kicked up from the seabed like great muddy bruises.

Millions of tiny stomps, marring oceans in their marching.

Rob eyed the kid from where he stood hunched over the washboards, nursing a cigarette, a hangover, and his damaged pride. Last night's cards had been a washout and the loss still smarted.

The kid was perched a few feet above him, leaning into the spray, all lanky limbs and no chest hair.

He didn't belong here, this kid. None of them did. They were trespassing in an unconquerable domain - a few miserable wretches brandishing nets.

Barely drops in the ocean.

The kid swung his legs, Rob spat and mulled, and the prawns marched on.

And then the kingfisher came to light on the crow's nest.

Rob hadn't noticed the bird approach the trawler, circle thrice and swoop. When it seemed to materialise on the railing, he started.

The kid froze.

It was barely an arm's length away, plumage slick and iridescent in the afternoon light.

The kid watched the bird. Rob watched the kid.

The kingfisher warily regarded them both, but remained perched on the railing, chest heaving.

Little bird, little bird, you've flown one hell of a way to stop here. Australia was but a notion now – they'd been trawling for weeks.

Rob had been trawling for years. Sailing around and around, *and around*. Pulling prawns.

He watched the small, convulsing figure gradually recover, the gasping breaths subside to soft sips. Even then, the kingfisher lingered, content to rest in the crow's nest for a while longer. It shifted a little, nuzzled a wing. Peered down at him.

And as Rob watched, the bird levelled his gaze, threw back its head, and began to sing.

Waltzing Matilda, Waltzing Matilda

You'll come a-Waltzing Matilda, with me-

Rob blanched.

Once a jolly swagman had a waltzing Matilda of his own. She'd waltzed in, stole his heart, and waltzed away with it, setting him alight so he crashed and burned.

Impossible. Kingfishers don't sing.

...and waited 'til his billy boiled

And re-boiled. And boiled again. There were a great many sorrows to drown.

Down came a jumbuck to drink at the wrong place at the wrong time...

Rob shook his head frantically, trying to pull himself together. He must be seriously whacked this time. The bird sang on.

Up jumped the swagman and grabbed the poor sot by the throat. They were both raving drunk, and no one stepped in.

Up rode the squatter, mounted on his thoroughbred,

Up rode the troopers, one, two, three, and they had slammed him, hadn't they?

One, two, seven years.

Rob sank to his knees. The kid either couldn't hear the kingfisher, or didn't care.

Up jumped the swagman and sprang into the billabong,

You'll never catch me alive, said he-

As suddenly as it arrived, the kingfisher took off in one homeward-bound, beating-winged blur, soon vanishing into the ether on its long journey back.

Now alone in the crow's nest, the kid resumed his dreaming and leg swinging, while below him an old man wept. Far away, a kingfisher shrieked, trailing the last snatches of song in its wake.

*And his ghost may be heard as you pass by that billabong,
you'll come a-Waltzing Matilda, with me.*