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S.S. TOBRUK: A senior naval officer

'There's two hatches open and it's hot. Through one, I could see a hundred people lying there on stretchers. I thought, "It's like a slave ship," I thought. "Jesus, I thought we were Australians. I thought we were a good bloody country.'"

– The Age

I'm walking the deck in whites. A career
with traditions and service and discipline,
and sea to the very horizons' rim.
There's my idea, it's simple and clean,

except there are depths. You live this life
and another one opens underneath,
like today, down the cavernous hatch, I've seen
what I used to think was a working hive

but the upturned rows on rows of faces
restless and hopeless, with prison to come –
there it was, a plate I scanned once, from
a history of transatlantic slavers.

Slave-ships were carefully diagrammed.
The maximum pay-load under hatches
called for measuring, averages

of height and width. Sickness, mortality,

low diet. Births? If they died on the way
there'd be places vacant. They overstocked,
it'd all work out by the time they docked.
Losses, profits – yes, it was trade.

But we provide stretchers – we're humane.
Opening hatches in tropical weather
is good form too. We're in this together
except I'm on deck, mulling the pain

of an age-old puzzle: why me, why them?
They're political scandal, they're cattle
that broke their fences and tried to scatter
fleeing from want and harm, to a dream

of belonging. My own grandfather came
in a boat, with one change of clothes, a Bible.
How was he different from this rabble?
He was white, and British. He hailed from Home

and not in distress; a sort of adventure,
empire-building, perhaps with luck
a good life founded on honest work –
their hope, these families headed for hell

in our hold, on Australia's order. I took
a fair go from Dad, and Mum said *heart*.
For a new free country, not a bad start.
And that's how I thought we were. Now look.