

Undula the wave

The opera starts by the water in far north Queensland.

Yarraba Gooday, missus.
Viola Good morning.
Yarraba You getting ready for swim?
Viola No.
Yarraba Too far?
Viola Far too far.
Yarraba Islands out there, not too far. Got a boat here.
Viola Will you bring me back?
Yarraba Ver' reliable. Get you there and back.
Viola What will I see?
Yarraba Show you an island for sale. You got nine quid?
Viola Nine pounds?
Yarraba I see you got that.
Viola Yes, I've got that ...
Yarraba Maybe you buy. Have a look.
Viola At an island?
Yarraba Had nine quid I'd buy it meself.
Viola You've been there, then?
Yarraba Born there.
Viola You were born there?
Yarraba Great place.
Viola Why don't you buy it then?
Yarraba Question make me sad. You let me visit, that make me happy.

Viola Nine pounds?
Yarraba Nine. (He holds up nine fingers.)
Viola I want to see it. If I like it, I'll ring my sister.
Yarraba She good lookin woman like you?
Viola Better.
Yarraba Don't believe it.

After a brief pause, Sam, Viola's sister, walks on.

Sam Where is it?
Viola Boat, darling, boat.
Yarraba All aboard!

They mime getting into a boat, and travelling across water. Viola points at three islands.

Viola The little one. That's going to be ours.
Sam But darling, what are we going to live on?
Viola (vaguely) Fish ...
Sam ... air ...
Viola ... sky ...
Sam ... clouds ...
Viola ... and water, coral, the bluest sea on earth ...
Sam We said we'd live for beauty. Now we're going to eat it!
Viola Step ashore, darling, and give me your arm. We're doing this together ...
Sam ... as long as we shall live!

They look around, and at each other in amazement.

Sam (smitten by what they're doing) What does it mean, to be on an island?

Viola It means to be separate. Cut off. Alone ...

Sam ... surrounded by water, and nothing else ...

Viola ... unless someone buys those islands ...

Sam They're far enough away.

Viola Where will we start, darling?

Sam We've started. We're here!

Viola Shall we give thanks?

Sam Who to?

Viola To daddy?

Sam He gave me nine pounds. And a train ticket.

Viola Daddy!

Sam (noticing) Tents?

Viola Yes. But we'll get a bigger one. Better.

Sam Cooking pots?

Viola Don't be domestic.

Sam Let's explore!

The young women disappear, though we hear their voices from time to time,. Meanwhile we hear other voices from the boat that brought them, and from nearby Dunk and Bedarra islands.

Yarraba They got a lot to learn.

Noel (on Bedarra) You say they're painters?

Yarraba Pictures, yeah.

Brian (on Dunk) Two women? What'll they do all day?

Chris (also on Dunk) It's what they do at night that interests me.

Brian We've got to get to know them.

Yarraba They might disappear ... leave their body and travel, over the sea by night ...

Chris Sounds good to me!

Noel They'll need people after a while. Not at first.

Sam (somewhere in the scrub) I thought I saw something move!

Viola It was my hat!

Sam No it wasn't, silly! Do you think we're the first who've ever been here?

Noel Silly, silly.

Viola The black man was born here. He said they used to visit ...

Sam Ooohh ...

Viola What's wrong?

Sam I wanted to be first ...

Noel But you're still alone ...

Brian ... need a boat to get to shore ...

Chris You can have company whenever you want ...

Brian, Chris, and Noel disappear, and the young women come back.

Viola We're out of time, darling. In a space of our own.

Sam Suspended.

Viola We'll paint ...

Sam ... and tell each other stories ...

Viola Let's start. We'll each do a painting, and we'll each tell a story!

Yarraba, remaining at his boat, starts to tell a story too.

Yarraba Cockatoo come across the land one day, get to the water. They're land birds, don't like the water. They think maybe somewhere good to live out there, so they fly a bit, then they get scared. Reckon if they get tired, they fall in the water. Then they see dolphin in the water, and a shark. One sits on the dolphin's back. Take me somewhere good. Second one, same with shark. Third one says no, I'm gunna keep going by myself. He flies off, they never see him again. Musta got tired, though. Fall, somewhere. Shark swallows second one, but it makes him sick. Cockatoo no good for his belly. Maybe doesn't like feathers, they tickle him or something. Urrrh! (vomiting sound) Dolphin swim a while, but he says it's too slow. Wants to go under, swim faster, down he goes. Third cockatoo clings with his claws, real hard. He drowns. Floats to the surface. Turns into your island, ladies! Used to be mine too, once. He's lonely, as an island, and he goes squark squark until his mates come back to him. Three islands now. Man on that one (Bedarra), people on that one (Dunk), now people here. Good thing.

Viola comes back to the beach.

Viola This is my story, Yarraba. Our father took Sam and I around the world. Twice. We visited all the great cities. London, Paris, New York. Moscow, Rome, Florence, Madrid. We saw all the great galleries, heard the great orchestras, met fine and famous people. We dined in the best restaurants, wore the finest clothes. We stayed in great hotels and travelled on stylish trains. Cars took us into the countryside. We tasted all the wines. Father said, This is the world, and now you've seen it all, don't accept anything but the best.

Yarraba What you doing here?

Viola You know what we're doing here. We lived in quality. Now we've found perfection ...

Yarraba Plenty of fish, if you know how to catch'em.

Viola You'll have to teach us. I'm sure we're ready to learn ...

Enter Sam, accompanied arm-in-arm by Noel, who's come across from his island.

Sam (introducing) My sister, Viola, my other half. Darling, this is Noel.

Noel I'll keep my island, but I'll come across whenever I see smoke.

Sam (triumphantly) We'll be cooking every day!

Yarraba Gotta catch'em first!

Viola We've got a lot to learn, and a lot to un-learn.

Sam And we're going to do it here. Darling, you've got to

	get yourself a man.	Sam	... I want to visit all those stars, and claim them, every one ...
Noel	You'll find you'll have plenty of suitors ...	Yarraba	Place is getting to ya. Thought it would.
Viola	... in a hurry to get their pants off ...	Viola	(to Sam) I need a man, you say?
Noel	They'll envy your perfection and want it for themselves.	Sam	It's the biggest thing we do.
Sam	(clinging to him) I found mine on the very first day.	Viola	Will I wait for him to come, or will I fly away to find him?
Noel	My love. I was happy, or so I told myself, painting, but I was lonely.	Yarraba	Easy by night. Mind can travel to the stars.
Viola	We're painters too.	Noel	(pointing up) Look!
Sam	Am I going to paint the island, the water, or the moods of love?	V & S	Aaaaaaaaaahhh ...
Yarraba	Put'em all together. That's the best way.	Noel	(beneath them) Aaaaaaaaaahhh ...
Sam	I'll need years of experience to do that ...	Yarraba	Never been any different. You're finding it, that's all ...
Noel	Every day, pick one moment, and paint it. That way, perfection goes on forever.	Viola	... in ourselves ...
Viola	Won't we have black days, black moods, moments of despair?	Sam	... on an island ...
Noel	That's when you let visitors tell you how lucky you are.	Noel	... pulling me in, lifting me up ... aaaaaaaaaahhh ...
Viola	Let's get started then. (Sam and Noel start to laugh.)	V & S	... aaaaaaaaaahhh ...
	It looks like it's up to me.	Chris	(on Dunk) They're going crazy over there!
Yarraba	Whatcha gonna do?	Brian	(also on Dunk) You'd love to be with'em, though, wouldn't you!
Viola	I'm going to wave my hands. Look, the sun's going down.	Chris	Mmmmmmmmm.
Sam	Night ...	Yarraba	I can feel a message. Someone calling you ladies.
Noel	It opens up a world ...	Viola	I thought I heard something too.
Viola	... of blackness, keen as day ...	Yarraba	(quite definite) Man's voice, calling. Reckon he know where you are ...
		Sam	It's Father, then.
		Viola	(after listening) He's sick, he's dying ...

Sam I can hear him too ...

Yarraba Not much pain. Leaving his body now.

Viola We'll have to leave you, Noel. We've got something to do for him, far away.

Sam Put him to rest ...

Noel Come back when you've done it. Don't leave me here alone!

Yarraba Get in the boat, I take you to land. They take you home in the big white bird.

Viola (correcting) To our father. This is home for us, now.

Sam I'm torn in two, darling ...

Viola Cling to what we've found. Be strong.

Noel Take a look at the stars before you go, and swear you're coming back.

Sam I swear ...

Noel You swear ...

Sam ... that I'll be coming back.

Viola That's clear, then; we're coming back.

Sam (reassuring Noel) I have to go for daddy's sake. I'm not giving up the paradise I've found.

Yarrabah Nobody got anything forever. All aboard, those that's going.

Viola and Sam get in his boat. It chugs off to land, out of sight. After a few moments, our ears are caught by radio messages emanating from Dunk.

Radio The American fleet at Pearl Harbour has been destroyed. Japanese bombers based on aircraft carri-

ers and Japanese submarines have struck the Pacific fleet. The devastation is covered by a dense cloud of smoke. The United States has declared war!

Brian Invaders! They'll be down this way pretty soon!

Chris They'll have ships along our coast.

Radio A Japanese fleet is rounding the corner of New Guinea! An American fleet is preparing to engage.

We hear rumbles of distant gunfire, and flashes as shells explode. This continues, intermittently, for the next minute or so. We hear, too, the rumbling of a train, and the chugging of Yarraba's boat. Noel comes out to meet them, and is introduced.

Viola Noel, this is Norm.

Noel Welcome Norm. Not a good time to be here.

Sam Better than anywhere else.

Norm The world's gone mad. We have to stay sane.

Viola If we can.

Noel The best way to keep your sanity is to be in love.

Norm (laughing) One madness to keep you safe from another!

Viola We can all be mad together!

Sam Fishing every day ...

Noel Every two weeks, supplies ...

Viola Yarraba and his boat ...

Norm Do we get letters?

Sam If somebody writes.

Viola (laughing) Trouble is, nobody writes ...

Sam Except daddy ...

Viola ... and he's gone ...
 Sam ... to be a bird ...
 Viola ... a star ...
 Sam ... but he's alive when we talk about him ...
 Viola ... so we never let him die ...
 Yarraba Ya startin to get the right idea ...
 Norm What about, Yarraba?
 Yarraba The sky, things comin' and goin'.
 Noel Are you a religious man, Yarraba?
 Yarraba Plenty of fish in the sea. They not miss one if we pull him out. Sea go on, fish go on. Plenty more tomorrow.
 Sam And the one that got eaten? What about him?
 Yarraba If you loved that fish, very sad.

There is more gunfire in the distance, and flashes.

Norm I want my country to survive. We've got to win!
 Viola We're separate from all that.
 Norm It's just over the horizon.
 Radio (on Dunk) The Japanese fleet has suffered heavy losses. The aircraft carrier Shokaku is limping back to the Philippines.
 N & N (roaring with joy) Aaaaaaaaahhh!!!
 Sam (cautiously) They never tell us bad news, in case we get downhearted.
 Viola I'm terrified, yet I think we're safe ...
 Radio The Japanese fleet that was heading for Port Moresby is turning back. They've given up!

Norm For now! For now ...
 Noel I'm starting a new picture tomorrow.
 Viola Called?
 Norm Tropical night. It'll have those gun flashes on the horizon. Evil creeping close.
 Sam Don't do that, Norm. Paint fish, and palms, birds, and cloud ...
 Norm Unreality!
 Sam Our reality!
 Viola We're island people. We've seen the world, and we've stepped apart ...
 Yarraba Everything connected, ya know, even here. Even on an island, ya can't forget ... (He waves a hand at the world beyond them.)
 Viola Oh yes I can! I'm here, and I'm never going to go away!
 Yarraba Wet season make a mess of ya. Might rip up that tent.
 Viola I hadn't thought of that.
 Sam (laughing) All it can do is make us wet!

Yarraba makes a wordless reply by waving his arms to indicate a mighty wind lifting their tent and blowing it into the sea.

Norm That's when we head south, I think.
 Noel I go in to Cairns.
 Sam Is it just as good when you come back?
 Noel I appreciate it even more.
 Sam Then that's what we'll do. Darling, you agree?

Viola	Night follows day follows night. We'll go south to escape the wet, then we'll come again.	Norm	My love's sending us out on a learning curve ...
Sam	Let's make a rule. Never to paint the same thing twice.	Viola	We'll go to the end of the universe, and come back, knowing a little more ...
Viola	What if we do it badly the first time?	Sam	Don't talk about the end. It makes me frightened.
Sam	Paint something else.	Viola	We need to be uneasy. It's what keeps our minds alive ...
Viola	No. There's some things we'll only understand slowly. We're surrounded by perfection, but that doesn't make us perfect.	Noel	... otherwise we sit in our tent, cursing the same old food ...
Norm	We've made our lives perfect by being here.	Norm	... wishing we were somewhere else ...
Noel	No. You have to work on it.	Sam	... making ourselves miserable, and wanting to get away ...
Viola	If you think you're perfect, you're not.	Viola	So we'll stay on this tiny island, increasing the empires of our mind ...
Sam	Don't start making things hard. We left all our problems on the shore.	Yarraba	Payin me to bring the things you need ...
Viola	All the other problems. This one's different.	Sam	... and the letters no one's going to write ...
Norm	Tell me what you're thinking of, my love?	Viola	... because we won't be writing any letters ourselves ...
Viola	We've got something wonderful. We have to take it further every day.	Noel	You'll find you don't want to, and if you do write, nobody knows what you're talking about, because ...
Noel	Painting ...	Norm	... they can't imagine what it's like ...
Sam	Living ...	All four	... to be here! Aaaaaaaahhh ... Aaaaaaaahhh ...
Viola	I know nothing. I can't tell you which star will be first at night, or where it will appear. The first bird in the morning, where did it come from? Did it sleep the night with us, or did it fly in, before we got up? Why do they wake in the dark? What's going on in the night, that they want to know?	Yarraba	If you're gunna sing all night, I better get supplies. You got that list, missus?
Noel	I've been here two years, and I haven't got a clue.	Viola points vaguely to their tent; Yarraba dashes in and comes out with a list.	
		Yarraba	Matches, candles, kerosene. Fish hooks, huh! You

crossed out writing pad, missus. (Viola nods, smiling.) Peas? Ya can't make'em grow, out here on the sand. Lotsa things. Canvas. Nother tent, oh. (He means the two couples want to be separate, at night at least.) Ya gotta lot of books here, ya gonna read?

Norm Stories, stories ...

Viola Something for our minds ...

Yarraba Ya minds?

They all laugh; he gets in his boat and heads off for shore, and the four remaining sing in ecstasy.

All four Aaaaaaaaahhh ... aaaaaaaaahhh ... aaaaaaaaahhh ...

Viola Night ...

Sam Day ...

Norm Night ...

Noel Day ...

All four Undulating ... flowing ... endlessly ... replacing us, when it's time, replacing all ... day ... night ... day ... night ... undulating, undula the wave, waving goodbye to time ... letting everything flow ... wash over us ... turning us into birds, and waves, clouds and sky and light ... lost ...

Viola ... in finding ourselves ...

All four ... disappearing out of time, washing against these shores ... joining with whatever brought us here ...

Viola What was it, darling? Why did we come?

Sam I don't remember what brought us. Don't you know?

All four (softly) Aaaaaaaaahhh ... aaaaaaaaahhh ...

As their voices soften, they sit on the sand.

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