The harbour was emu-berry blue, the ripples playing with the sun. The breeze smelt of smoke and cooking fish. Nanberry waded in till the water tickled his waist, felt the sandy mud between his toes, then took a deep breath and dived down.

It was a new world. Light drifted in gold shivers from above. Nanberry wriggled like a fish, turning so he could see the surface of the water. He loved this most of all: how in one instant you could change from air to sea.

At last his lungs began to ache. He pushed himself into the daylight in one strong sweep.

One of the girls yelled at him from the shore — his sister, Yagali, catching a ball of twisted twigs and feathers as one of the others threw it to her. 'Hey, you with empty hands! Where are the dainya?' The other girls laughed. Behind them the stream trickled between the trees and mud flats to join the waves.
Nanberry grinned. Who needed dainya, the mud oysters? The women had been out in their low-slung canoes, hauling in fish with nets and lines. Colbee had speared a giant waragul, a mackerel, too.

The girls went back to their game. Nanberry began to wade to shore.

‘Maigul!’ Stranger!

Nanberry turned to see where Yagali pointed.

For a second he thought he dreamt. His eight years had been full of familiar things. The warriors and old women knew all that was important in the world. But no one had ever spoken of anything like this!

Massive canoes surged across the water. They looked like whales that had learnt how to swim on top of the sea. Giant skins flapped on tall spears jutting from their middles.

How did canoes move with no paddles? Had the spirit ancestors made them?

The girls ran for the trees. Their ball lay abandoned in the sand. But Nanberry stayed, his toes in the mud and sea, his eyes straining to capture every detail of the big canoes.

‘Nanberry! Guwi!’ Nanberry, come here!

Colbee strode towards him. Colbee was his mother’s brother, a warrior. You obeyed when a warrior called you, especially if he was your mother’s brother. Nanberry splashed back to the shore, then turned once more to stare at the strange canoes.

‘Into the trees,’ yelled Colbee. He pointed to the women and children standing still and almost invisible next to the tree trunks.

This time Nanberry didn’t move. ‘What are they? Are they ghost canoes?’

‘I don’t know. But others have seen things like them before.’

‘Who?’

‘It is no business for small boys.’

Nanberry still didn’t move. Canoes. ‘A runner came from the south. A great fleet of murry nowey came to their country. The murry nowey slipped across the line between sea and sky, the land of clouds and ghosts. The murry nowey gathered in the runner’s tribe’s bay. The creatures on them had white skin, like ghosts, but they looked for water, like men, and hunted with long sticks that went baboom.’

The murry nowey were even closer now, gliding across the water.

‘Go!’ ordered Colbee.

This time Nanberry went.

The warriors strode down to the water, waving their fishing spears, the jagged shell points gleaming in the sun. ‘Jiriya! Wari! Waril!’ Get away from here!

The big canoes floated straight towards them, as though the warriors were buzzing bees who had no sting. And then the canoes stopped, even though they were still far from the beach. Nanberry stared out between the trees.

He could see people! Men with white faces, their bodies covered in the skins of strange animals, blue and red and brownish grey. Their voices sounded like human voices, not the wind-whispering of ghosts.

Some of the white ghosts glanced over at the warriors. None bothered to answer the challenge, or even call a greeting. It is as though we are the ghosts, thought Nanberry. As though they expect us to fade away.

The giant canoes glided on. The warriors yelled a challenge again. The white ghosts laughed, then looked away. Colbee muttered something to the other warriors. They melted back into the trees, urging the women and children to follow. Whatever the white ghosts were going to do next, it was best to stay away.

Life would go on, in its proper seasons, as it always had before. The ghosts would float away.
Only Nanberry lingered, still peering from behind his tree. He had thought he had made himself part of the sea. But these big canoes conquered the waves like the sea eagle controlled the wind. If only he could ride the waves like that. If only he could slip between the wrinkle at the edge of the sea and sky and see the world beyond the blue horizon.

But he was Nanberry. This was his home, and the Cadigal were his people.

The breeze held the scent of strange things now, of memories of a world far away. Nanberry took a last look out at the pale men busy with vast ropes, then ran back to join his family.