

# Breach

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I am looking across the white-capped waves of Port Phillip Bay as a biting wind tears through my thin sweater. I am underdressed but stop short of admonishing myself. I had dressed in a hurry this morning – woken unceremoniously from unsettling dreams of desert sands and ghostly cries. The night before had been hot – blistering winds from the north had rattled my windows, causing me to toss and turn, preventing me from falling asleep. When I awoke, sheets twisted into a ball at my feet, it was with a groggy film across my eyes and a foreboding sense of dread that something unexpected and terrifying lay just beyond the horizon.

A cup of too-hot coffee rested beside my computer as I flicked through the news. It was a while before I saw it – a hidden, tenuous headline, designed to remain so, hoping desperately to remain undiscovered – ‘Corio Refinery Breach’. That word – breach – springs to mind breaking dam walls, breaching a protest picket line, a breach of the law. All these things applied – as I would soon find out.

So now I am looking across the white capped waves of Port Phillip Bay – regretting my hurried choice of clothing, camera lens at the ready. The refinery is cordoned off and I have driven to the Avalon Coastal Reserve to get a better view of the refinery. I wade slowly through the old salt marsh, down towards the water’s edge. I stop short and raise my camera slowly. In the distance I can see a white-faced heron, prostrate on the shoreline, wings glistening with oil, shining like diamonds around her neck.

*‘Why are you here?’ she asks. ‘You can’t help me’.*

The air is thick with the acrid smell of fuel, evoking memories of when I was a kid – sitting in the backseat while mum filled the tank. This was once a salt farm. Cubic metres stretching farther than the eye could see. The horizon mottled with birds, a cacophonous symphony which would never be the melodious type, but it was joyous, nonetheless.

I used to run across these wetlands, but now, I walk. I walk along what once used to be salt ponds, now in varying colours of beige, their putrid stench an antithesis of the once salty air that filled our lungs.

As I trail along the shore, the chunk-laden water washes over my feet, leaving a shine from the grease. The white-faced heron is buried under the sludge before me, desperately trying to peel its decrepit body from the foul sludge, trembling as it struggles to lift itself. Even its instincts fail to bring it to safety.

Crouching before the frail bird, I lift it out of the oily muck. The sickening grime leaves streaks on my hands and clothes as the bird squirms, its feathers matted with unidentifiable chunks of filth. One of its wings is at an odd angle, like a broken matchstick or a tattered wing on a balsa wood glider.

With a chain of shrill screeches from the bird, its body writhes within my grasp. In a panicked flurry I drop the bird back into the sludge. I quickly step back and surprisingly, despite its broken wing, the heron takes off into the sky its wings still weighed down by the muck as it totters in the air.

*'You wish to help?' she asks. 'You bring only suffering'.*

I raise my camera, twisting the lens as it focuses on the white-faced heron, and peek through. I'm astonished. Quickly pulling my gaze from the camera lens, I look around me, taking in the foul waters, a vile concoction of chunks and grease, a visual assault. Hesitantly, I raise the camera once more, staring in awe.

The white-faced heron lands on a piece of driftwood, floating languidly on the cerulean waves. The bird shakes off its once-matted feathers and the oil slick turns to dust like the salt flakes of the marsh. It stretches its glistening wings in the sunlight, face upturned, beak slightly agape. Turning the lens, I cannot help the beginnings of a beaming smile that begins to twitch at the corners of my mouth. Salt glistening around me, buried to my ankles in the crystals, I can feel that familiar salty burn against my skin.

I kneel in the salt feeling the sting of the crystals against my torn-up knees. It doesn't bother me; I raise my camera to the bird, a grin on my face as I snap a photograph of it. The heron was whole and beautiful. The salt sparkling off its wings as it ruffles the pristine feathers that adorn its body. I knew it was too good to be true...and it was.

I pull my eye from the lens, lowering the camera to my lap as I frantically flick through the photos on the screen, my excitement fading quicker than it came. The reality in the photos is disgusting, hideous, even morbid. Disbelieving, my breath hitches as I look to the driftwood with wide eyes, my arms trembling as I drop the camera into the sludge that I kneel in, the pollution turning my skin red. The camera lens reveals only what I wish. In the distance is the reality of human destruction. The heron's body was dark, torn, and lifeless. A trail of greasy feathers afloat in the water, its limp body bouncing with the waves. I can't do anything but watch as the driftwood repeatedly hits the channel buoys, its hollow bones slowly being crushed under the pressure. I felt sick to my stomach. I could feel the bile in my throat rising. Hacking up my lungs, tears well in my eyes as my throat burns.

*'You see me, human?' she asks. 'You are just like the rest'.*