

Calloused palms fade to dust / gravel punctured by tattered white ribbon / I cooee into the
homecoming wind / the sound of nightfall / dusk / a fingernail hanging / by a thread of
brittle skin / hands imprint on geometry / I locate myself, held inside / within each contour
/ each mountain, as sheer / as a cardboard cut-out / beauty so severe yet fleeting / like a
paper-cut to the eye / that familiar hustle / of a condensed metropolis / fronds splayed /
fondled by the light breeze / interwoven by change and pace / of an evolving subculture /
listen / the drone of worker bees / as they drift from hive to hive / daunted by a shortage
of their / precious liquid gold / the land / it lies there in waiting / dormant yet alive with
an unseen / heartbeat / faithful as a wagging tail / as though I'd only just / left home.

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A tear snakes its way over the crest of my cheek and lands, with a *plink* on the lip of the saucer. More
follow, creating ripples on the china pond cupped in my hand. A porcelain face appears — a memory
rather than a reflection — cornmeal blue eyes and a nest of auburn hair. My cup of Earl Grey, which
should afford comfort, offers only a bleak reminder that this journey is more difficult than I had
anticipated. I gaze closer, until every marble contour of the face is magnified. The milky chalice stirs a
deep yearning, which sinks lower into my gut than the afternoon sun. As I stare, transfixed, the red hair
erupts. Deeper into the cup my eyes take me — Back to that day.

*I scramble in a blind attempt to grab onto a foothold. As my body brushes up against the metal, heat
flares against my bare skin, charging every particle of my body. I swivel in the water, trying to make out
what has fallen in after me. With my remaining of my strength I haul the waterlogged bulk to the surface.
His lips are blue. He is barely conscious.*

His eyelids flicker. 'Briony.'

*We hold each other in the murky water, floating, somewhat serenely, as the square of blue sky —
our only chance of escape — grows smaller and the smoke billows into the chamber.*

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A jolt lifts me from my seat. The locomotive clunks over a narrow bridge. I have lost track of how long I have been sitting here. It is night; everything outside the glass is a charcoal smudge. I'm miles away from anywhere, hurtling in the direction of an even greater unknown. I remind myself that, where I am going is no different to where I had come from.

Buried in a timeless seam / a swaying symphony of / fibres and stalks / cat tails
a'flower / prancing on the sultry prairie / of dreams and dancers / seasons / at
the sight of harvest / his crows' feet align / creases as deep as the trenches he'd
fought from / and he retreats / into the corrugated hive / to ready for the drop.

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My mother's crocheted doily flaps in the light breeze, pinned to the card table by an arrangement of potted succulents. I can always tell when a summer storm is brewing. The static rise of my hair and the liquid humidity clogs every pore. In the rain, I wreak havoc, swinging on the Hills Hoist and soaking my bloomers with every splash. Ma races around the backyard with a shower cap, only to dunk my head in a laundry tub of Pears shampoo later. I sit on the back veranda, listening to slow jazz on the wireless and watching the tempest clash across the vast contusion of sky. Pa in his rocking chair, smoothing the pages of the newsprint, and Ma, hunched over her card table sipping her Bushells.

I long for someone I can share my love of nature and tell cloud stories with in the tall grass.

It comes, steady as a / drumbeat / rumbling from the East/ a churning
transparency / of pearled forms / contained in their liquid shells / bullets rain
down / piercing the lead-weight air / puckering to the cracked Earth, like /
drops of ink to parchment / soaking up the tendrils of humidity / consuming
the atmosphere / steam rises, soldiers from the mist / forked tongues lash at
the paper bluffs / igniting them with fire and water / what begins as harmony /
erupts into turmoil / a fiery undertow / a ritual as ancient as the land itself.

The day comes — my senior year — when I meet Robbie.

I am on the three o'clock bus, heading home, when he takes the seat next to me. He is from out of town, I hear them whisper: he's from the big smoke. Robbie Frey, he introduces himself as, is much taller than

me, with fair skin and a charming, lopsided grin. His parents are not farmers, like mine, but we find things to talk about just the same. We see each other at the same time for the ride home every day for two weeks. When he hops off the bus at the Machans Beach depot one afternoon, I follow. We walk down the well-trodden path towards the shore. Where the mangroves meet the sea, Robbie gestures me to follow. Our roam takes us away from the beach: up an estuary that branches off to Holloways inlet: a place for saltwater crocodiles and long-legged Ibis to stalk. We come across a tinny, tied to a lone Coolabah tree.

'It's my father's. He doesn't mind.'

Robbie smiles and pulls me close and we climb in.

I gaze momentarily at the reflection in the windowpane. My face, tanned from the field, is assuredly wiser. My hair is silver-lined, revealing a startling contrast to the dark exterior world. My eyes are two tunnels of eerie blue framed by a hollow cheek, and my lips are colourless, dulled by the stale air of the cabin. The longing for the tropical surroundings of home arouses the scent of a familiar perfume, the evocative blend of spiced musk and sweet hibiscus.

The last of the strays pelt / striking tin / hollow clockwork / sparkling jewels /
line every street / draping the air with dappled / awakening / weighted leaves
fall / speckled like boats / floating lazy upon a serene harbour/ a silver streak
clunks / over corroded rails / causing no disruption / to the muddy estuary
beneath / a habitat for salt-armoured jaws to roam / ripened by a fringe of
mangroves/ a stench so familiar, my pores / revel in it / winding out, beyond the
/ steady stream of eyes and feet / lies blue isolation / free of minds / untouched /
crush of colour / azure blue to / canopy's edge / entwining / only upon wings /
steered by crossing currents / is entry gained / the vastness echoed by sky and
space / clusters of stars and coral / schools of fish twinkle / luminous

And up, up

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After what seems like an hour, we reach a point where we can't go any further. Robbie hauls the tinny up on the bank, beckoning me to follow. We venture up the creek, which widens into a river and

eventually a lake, steeped either side by the misty precipice of the Barron Gorge. It is one of those sights you tuck away into your mind forever; the unfolding wings of a pelican as it launches off the water, the ripples of fish below the surface. Rays of translucent sunshine reach into the tea-coloured depths. Above, the clouds are pregnant with the chance of a late afternoon storm. And the smell! The smell of sweet, lush expectancy.

It is here, at the age of 16, we share our first kiss, hands clutched tenderly, standing knee-deep in the pristine water.

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Although no-one is watching, I comb my hair down to cover my face and hide my childish grin, paranoid should someone tap into my subconscious and release an outpouring of childhood dreams. The memory of a first kiss is one that never fades, no matter how many come after, for it is never to be erased of all its purity and tingling delight. Just the memory of it brings a smile to my lips all these years later. The time where guilt once washed over me has gone, along with the letters, and photographs. Those too are all gone. Curling myself around the memory, I close my eyes.

When I wake, the morning sun has reached a point in the sky where no more stars are visible, and it warms my skin as I rest against the window.

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The drought comes early that year and overstays its welcome. Temperatures soar above mid-thirties and only the ancient ceiling fan on the western-facing patio offers some relief from the stillness.

'Hottest on record.' Pa is pacing back and forth with a permanent furrow on his brow. He squints out beyond the wilting stalks, waiting for a drop of moisture to fall and pucker to the cracked earth.

Ma and I know to steer well away from Pa when he's in a foul mood; it's Robbie who learns the hard way. Pa confronts him one day when Ma and I are in town fetching groceries.

Robbie doesn't say much when I ask him what happened, and for some reason he doesn't come by as often after that. A few nights later, Pa sits me down with a serious look on his face.

'Briony, we raised you with a good head on your shoulders. Now I've noticed you're gettin' cosy with this city lad and I get the whiff of a bad crop there. Your Ma and I would like to remind you what is important to us, and that is for you to work the land. Make us proud, girl and stop foolin' around.

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Bare hands become ploughs / placing bundles of rolled pastry / upon the *terra firma* / connected, yet / separated like the chambers of my heart / locking in the fertility of the land / as it filters matter from memory / roughly sown memories / reap afternoon regrets / the sun is a blistering sphere / setting over / a sea of stirred repercussions / lapping at feet / eroding my conscience.

It is at the start of the first harvest of the year when the accident takes place. Pa puts me in charge of driving the watering truck up and down the channels between each cane quadrant.

'Briony, listen because this is important. You must set the irrigation timer to go off every half an hour on rotation. If I see one concentrated patch, that's giving fuel to the fire, y'hear. Each bundle of cane mulch can ignite in a second if this heat keeps up.'

I connect the irrigation arc up to the bore water and set it to low to keep the soil moist. I am at the last bore, when I hear a shout. It's Robbie, yelling my name at the top of his voice. Grinning, I climb to the top of the truck and wave my hands.

'Here! Robbie! I'm over here!'

It's been months since we've last seen each other – since he has moved to Townsville for University. In all my excitement, I step back, balancing on one foot as the other finds its grip. I feel a surge of fear take hold as I stumble, feathery air beneath me as I fall...

The train slows. A crackling in the speakers announces a momentary stop. Gathering my thoughts and my few belongings, I step onto the platform. Instead of the usual commotion — travellers dragging suitcases and late departure calls — there is only silence.

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All I want is to get there fast enough. Fighting off the tapered tips of cane, I run with the will to hold her in my arms, beg her not to leave. Beg her to stay... to tell her I loved her. Love her. My words are cut short by the pungent smell of burning vegetation. All around me I see thin wisps of smoke venting from the bundles of cane, sizzling the sweetness inside. A fatal pause and the stack of cane ignites, sending plumes of sugary smoke into the air. From within the blistering inferno, I see her waving in distress, calling my name.

I try to warn her —

'Bri! Bri! It's me! Get down!'

— and in my moment of terror, I watch as she plunges over the side of the truck and into the reservoir. I dive in after her, but in my sheer panic, my head strikes metal and the scene folds into darkness.

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Our worlds collide. The train station melts before my eyes. Blackness engulfs the space between us, making the distance between our shaking fingertips seem like the length of the universe. I want to say I am sorry, that I will do anything to take back what I have done. It is a battle between my brain and vocal chords...to relive that moment where our conversations flowed freely. Now, our bodies edge closer, a torrent of words unspoken. But we stay in our minds; to give silence a reason to be.

Fighting for escape / a bird, caged / pecking incessantly / at my head / pitting my mind / like a cyst / cracks appear / time once stored / has emerged / this life / overtaken by the tangle of time / meant to be re-lived / first love / settles in these old bones / destined to belong / as though I'd only just / come home.

Years, it feels like, I have waited at this station. Throngs of people converge in and out of automatic doors; each departing train is a deeper tug on my heart. Muddled whispers flit, interwoven by space and time as passengers signal goodbye. They are all gone now, to a better place, and now I can see it is my time. The last train draws in with a throaty rumble. The door opens and the activity ceases on the platform, shuffled away like two-dimensional props on a stage. The only thing real, existing to me, is the figure waiting for me to step on-board, beckoning with his endearing lop-sided grin.

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