'I say goodbye to all that, throwing rocks down Longlands Road.'
It’s the only time my schoolbag has come in handy.
I tip my books, pens, jumper out on my bed,
shake yesterday’s sandwich, squashed,
from the bottom of the bag.
I go to the kitchen,
take the beer,
last night’s leftovers,
some glossy red apples,
Dad’s champagne and cigarettes,
load my schoolbag,
my travelling bag,
leave the bottle of lemonade on the table
with a note,
‘See ya Dad.
I’ve taken the alcohol.
Drink this instead
to celebrate your son
leaving home.’

The old bastard will have a fit!
And me?
I’ll be long gone.
Kiss the dog

I’m not proud.
I’m sixteen, and soon
to be homeless.
I sit on the veranda
and watch the cold rain fall.
Bunkbrain, our dog,
sits beside me.
I’d like to take him with me.
He doesn’t deserve to stay
in this dump, no-one does.
But you don’t get rides
with a dog.
And two mouths to feed
is one too many.
Bunkbrain knows something,
he nuzzles in close,
his nose wet and dirty
from sniffing for long-lost bones.
I scratch behind his ears
and kiss the soft hair
on his head.
I’ll miss you dog.
I’m not proud.
I’m leaving.
The rain falls steady.
Bunkbrain stays on the veranda.
This place has never looked
so rundown and beat.
Old Basten’s truck still on blocks,
the grass unmown around the doors.
Mrs Johnston’s mailbox on the ground
after I took to it with a cricket bat
last week.
And the windows to the Spencer house
still broken
from New Year’s Eve,
it must get cold in the front room
at night.
My street.
My suburb.
I take a handful of rocks,
golf ball size.
I walk slowly in the rain
the bag on my back.
I throw one rock on the roof
of each deadbeat no-hoper
shithole lonely downtrodden house
in Longlands Road, Nowheresville.
The rocks bounce and clatter
and roll and protest
at being left in this damn place.
I say goodbye to all that,
throwing rocks down Longlands Road.
Wentworth High School

I reach school at four-thirty
in the rainy afternoon
of my goodbyes.
Principal Viera’s Holden
pulls out of the car park
and blows smoke down the road.
I jump the fence
and walk the grounds.
The wind howls and rain sheets in
blowing potato crisp wrappers
across the oval.
I go to Room 421
and look through the window.
Mr Cheetam’s homework is on the board.
Twenty-six students are learning
about the geography of Japan
and one lucky bastard is writing
‘may you all get
well and truly stuffed’
on the window
in K-Mart red lipstick
stolen especially for this occasion.
I sign my name in red
‘Billy Luckett,
rhymes with …’
Let Cheetam chew on that.
I love this place.
I love the flow of cold clear water
over the rocks
and the wattles on the bank
and the lizards sunbaking,
heads up, listening,
and the birds,
hundreds of them,
silver-eyes and currawongs,
kookaburras laughing
at us kids swinging on the rope
and dropping into the bracing flow.
I spent half my school days here
reading books I’d stolen
from Megalong Bookshop
with old Tom Whitton
thinking I’m his best customer
buying one book
with three others shoved up my jumper.
I failed every Year 10 subject
except English.
I can read.
I can dream.
I know about the world.
I learnt all I need to know
in books on the banks
of Westfield Creek,
my favourite classroom.
The Great Western Highway
is not much of a highway,
not great at all,
but it does head west,
which is where I’m going
if one of these damn cars
will only stop and give me a ride.
Two hours in the dark
in the rain
in the dirt of this bloody road
is not getting me anywhere.
What to do?
Go home?
‘Say Dad,
I still want to leave
but I couldn’t get a lift
so one more night
that’s OK with you, isn’t it?’
He’d be sober because I stole
his beer
his champagne.
No. I can’t go back.
I could sleep at school,
on the veranda.
One more hour of this,
just one ride,
please.
Freight train

Not one car has passed
in the last twenty minutes.
At least the rain has stopped.
I’m sitting on my bag
looking across at the freight train
stopped at the crossing
for no good reason.
Fifty coal carriages,
empty,
heading to the Waggawang Coalfields
and one carriage
with a speedboat strapped on top.
A speedboat on a train
heading west?
To what?
A coalfield lake?
The inland river system
dry as a dead dingo’s bones?
And then it hits me.
Who cares. It’s heading west,
and I’m not …
so …
I race across the highway,
bag swinging,
and the train whistle blows
as I reach the bushes beside the track,
a quick glance, both ways, 
and I’m up on the carriage 
pulling myself into the 
Aquadream Speedboat 
with the soft padded bench seat, 
the Evinrude outboard motor 
and the fishing gear. 
The train whistle blows again 
and we lurch forward 
as I get my ride 
on a speedboat out of town 
and not a lake for miles.
Cold

Two kilometres down the track
I realise
how fast trains go
when you’ve got no window to close
and the wind and rain
hits you in the face
with the force of a father’s punch.
I unpack my bag
put my jacket on
wrap a jumper around my ears and neck
put my spare pants on
over my trousers
and I’m still freezing
and the whistle keeps blowing
as we speed through the bitter night.
I’ll be frozen dead
before morning.
I snuggle under the bow
of this speeding speedboat
cutting the night
my knees tight against my chest
and my teeth clenched
in some wild frost-bitten grin
and that train whistle keeps me sane
blowing across every dirt road crossing
with flashing red lights
and not a soul awake
except the train driver
warm in his cabin
and the idiot
hunched under the bow
praying for morning and sunshine.
‘Hey kid,
get outta there.
You’ll freeze to death.
That’ll teach you
to hitch a ride with National Rail.
No free rides with this government, son.
Just kidding.
I hate the bloody government.
Get your bag
and come back to the guard’s van.
There’s a heater that works,
and some coffee.
We’ve stopped here
waiting for the Interstate.
Passengers snoring in their comfy cabins
get priority
over empty coal trains.
Say, what do you think of me boat?
Yep, mine.
I got a special deal to bring it home.
We’ve got a lake outside of town,
perfect for fishing
and getting away from the telly.
I’m going to sit in this tub
and drink myself stupid
every weekend.
There you go.
Make a cuppa if you want.
And here’s some sandwiches,
too much salad for my liking.
Just don’t tell anyone about this, OK.
I’ll see you in the morning.
We’ll be in Bendarat at dawn.
I’ll blow the whistle three times
and I’ll stop just before town.
Jump out then, OK.

Keep warm.
I’ve got a train to drive.’
There are men like Ernie, the train driver, in this world. Men who don’t boss you around and don’t ask prying questions and don’t get bitter at anyone different from them. Men who share a drink and food and a warm cabin when they don’t have to. Men who know the value of things like an old boat built for long weekends on a lake. Men who see something happening and know if it’s right or wrong and aren’t afraid to make that call. There are men like Ernie and there are other men, men like my dad.
I was ten years old
in the backyard
kicking a soccer ball
against the bedroom wall,
practising for the weekend.
My first season of sport
and I’d already scored a goal,
so I kept practising, alone.
And I guess I tried too hard,
I kicked it too high,
stupid of me I know,
and I broke the bedroom window.
I stood in the yard
holding the ball
looking at the crack in the pane.
Dad came thundering out.
He didn’t look at the damage.
He’d heard it.
He came over, grabbed the ball,
kicked it over the back fence
into the bushes,
gave me one hard backhander
across the face,
so hard I fell down
as much in shock as anything,
and I felt the blood
from my nose,
I could taste it dribbling out
as Dad stood over me
and said
no more sport
no more forever.
He walked back inside
and slammed the door
on my sporting childhood
that disappeared into the bushes
with my soccer ball.

I was ten years old.
I didn’t go inside for hours.
I looked through the back window
watching him
reading the paper
in front of the television
as if nothing
had happened.
Another crossing

Ernie was right,
too much salad in the sandwich,
but I ate it all the same.
I had a coffee
heaped with sugar
sweet and hot
and I felt warm
like Ernie had wished.
I took the champagne
out of my bag
and stood it on the table
between Ernie’s coffee pot
and his lunch box.
I wrote a note.
‘Thanks Ernie.
Here’s a present
to launch your boat.
Don’t smash it though!
Drink it.’
I heard the whistle again
and looked out at
another lonesome crossing
and felt glad
that the champagne
was going to someone
who deserved it.