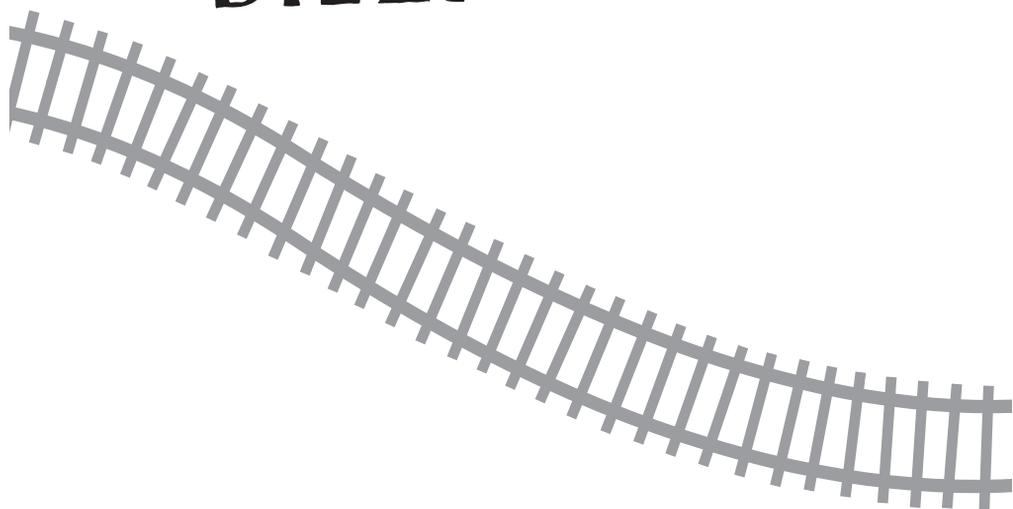


# 1 CHAMPAGNE BILLY



*'I say goodbye to all that,  
throwing rocks down Longlands Road.'*

## Champagne

*Billy*

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

*Billy*

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.

## Longlands Road

*Billy*

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

*Billy*

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 Lockett,  
rhymes with ...'  
Let Cheetam chew on that.

## Westfield Creek

*Billy*

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.

## Please

*Billy*

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

*Billy*

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

*Billy*

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.

## Keep warm

*Ernie*

'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.'

## Men

*Billy*

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.

## Sport

*Billy*

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

*Billy*

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.