

RACHEL

My town
is exactly
four hundred and twenty-two kilometres
from the ocean.
I check the distance
driving home from holidays
with Mum and Dad
the day before school begins
and while Bondi Beach
gets frothy waves
of cool, salty water on white sand
my town suffers
waves of dust storms
and locust plagues
and heat that melts the bitumen
and the first thing I do
when we get home
after driving all day
is run down to the dam
in the near paddock
and dive in.
The water is warm and brown.

My toes squelch in the mud
while the windmill clanks.
A pond-skater buzzes the surface
and starlings fantail
across the sky
the day before school begins.

LAURA

My new teacher
wears a flowing summer dress
with red pianos printed
on white linen.
Her hair is crow-black and messy
and she pulls it back
from her face
and ties it with a red ribbon.
She wears black ballet shoes
and casually sits on her desk
before asking us
to tell her something, one thing,
that we like about ourselves.
Selina, Mick, Cameron, Pete and Rachel
immediately
raise their hands
while I slink as low as possible
behind my desk.

SELINA

Ms Arthur said we should
bring in a photo of ourselves,
our favourite,
to paste on the Class 6A wall
and we could draw a design
around the photo
with our name, in bright colours.
And underneath our photo
we could write,
once a week,
what we've done lately
or what made us happy, or sad.
'Just like Facebook,' I said.

On Tuesday we spent all morning
drawing our names in big letters
with swirling colours
of red, yellow, green and blue.
Except Cameron
who wrote his name in *tiny letters*.
His writing was so small
you had to go really close

just to see if it was there at all.
And he'd chosen a thumbnail photo
of when he was a baby
lying in a cot asleep.
Cameron spent the whole morning
admiring his *little* photo and his *teeny* name
surrounded by glaring white cardboard.
Sometimes he stepped back
and looked at the photo from different angles,
like an artist.
Then he'd move close and adjust it,
just slightly.
Finally Ms Arthur couldn't stand it any longer.
She asked Cameron
if he planned to add anything
to his cardboard.
Cameron looked shocked
and said, in his usual loud voice,
'No way, Ms.
I want to have lots of space
to write about everything I think!'

MICK

I'm staring out the window
minding no one's business but my own
because Ms Arthur is teaching maths
and that's not really my go.
What do we have calculators for?
Charlie Deakin from 5C comes in with a note
and Ms Arthur tells me the Principal
'requires my presence in his office'.
So I follow Charlie along the verandah
and he's smirking the whole time
because no one gets called out of class
for good news,
it's always trouble,
but I don't say anything
and I don't act nervous
because I haven't done anything wrong,
not lately anyway.
Well, not that Mr Hume knows
and I trust my classmates not to tell anyway.
Charlie Deakin is still grinning
like he's won a prize,
yeah, first-prize boofhead.

He knocks on the Principal's door
and says to me,
'Hume's madder than a nest of bull ants.'
Charlie Deakin opens the door
and walks away down the hallway
leaving me standing there
with Mr Hume looking at me
and he's not smiling.

ALEX

I thought it was a simple question, really.
Ms Arthur asked each of us to stand up, in turn,
and say what we want to be
when we grow up.
The first five students said,
'Farmer.'
Then Rachel said,
'Pilot.'
And we went slowly around the class,
'Teacher.'
'Doctor.'
'Truck driver.'
'Vet.'
'Soldier.'
When it was my turn,
I stood up
and, in a very clear voice, said,
'A dad.'
A few people giggled
as if I'd said something rude,
or stupid.
I sat down again,

red-faced and confused.
It was the truth.
I wanted to be a dad.
I've never seen my dad
and I wouldn't wish that
on anyone.
Rachel stood up, again,
and said,
'Ms Arthur, I want to be a pilot
and a mum!'

MICK

'Yeah, he's my brother
and I'm supposed to look after him
but it was lunchtime, Mr Hume,
and the canteen has a special –
two dollars for a hot dog and drink.
You should try it, sir.
Mrs Casey says it's a low-fat dog,
if you're worried.
Not that you need to be worried, sir.
Not at all.

Back to my brother,
well, he's been talking all week
about wanting to fly, sir.
I thought he meant in a plane.
You know, like normal people.

You've got to admit it was pretty impressive
climbing on the roof of the groundsman's shed.
Maybe planting wattles that close
wasn't such a good idea
even if they bloom yellow all summer.

I don't think he meant to jump, sir.
He was probably just checking the wind speed.

No, sir. I did not give him
the feathers, the sticks or the glue.
He'll be in big trouble with Mum
when she discovers the spare doona is empty.

Yes, it's true, last year
I told all the boys in Kindy
they had to wear a dress in honour
of Darcy Dress, the famous inventor.
I got a week's detention,
and Mum had me sewing,
can you believe it,
sewing dresses, as punishment!
I've learnt my lesson, sir.
So, honestly, truly and no kidding,
I didn't tell Jacob to jump off the roof.

How is Mr Korsky, sir?
It must have been a shock,
having an eight-year-old land on your back.
But I hear it broke Jacob's fall, sir.
Mr Korsky is a hero!

Maybe we should celebrate,
have a special lunch?
Ask Mrs Casey to order in pizzas?
Sorry, sir, I know that's off the point,
so, trust me,
I will talk to Jacob about
outlandish flying experiments
and jumping off the roof,
I promise.'