

Poems from another planet

Marty's satchel bangs against the gate. His mother is watching from the porch, the baby propped on her hip.

'Your father says we'll have the money by next week.'

Marty wanders to the bus stop. Stagnant water rests in the side-cut between the under-gravelled road and the over-irrigated paddocks. There are butterflies, white flickering scraps hovering in the overgrown grass and weeds.

Three girls sit in the corrugated-iron shelter of the bus stop. In new uniforms, skin shining, they contemplate him, their bare legs crossed right over left.

'Marty,' the one in the middle says, and recrosses her legs, flashing gleaming shoes, white socks, brown shins and thighs, and blue panties. 'School's in, Marty,' she says. Her friends laugh.

Marty looks back along the track he has wandered down, where he can just make out his mother, one arm extended and pointing towards the bus stop, the lump of his baby sister wedged on her hip. He wonders if babies can see that far. He knows he should have worn his glasses. *They were blue, right?* He tugs at the front of his too-small jumper and tries to ignore the chatter of the girls behind him.

The irrigated paddocks share-farmed by his parents are just out of town, near enough for Marty to walk to school, but he likes the bus, and is sure that Parko has saved a seat for him.

When the bus arrives, the girls push in front of him, laughing. Inside, they fill vacant seats towards the middle of the vehicle. Marty, who is a year older, stumbles towards the back, where Parko, red-haired and grinning, shouts, 'Here he is, here's the man. Here's Marty.' Marty flops into the empty seat next to Parko. The girls turn in their seats, smiling.

Parko says, 'He give you any trouble out there, girls.' They shake their heads, and laugh. They face the front of the bus when it's obvious that Marty won't speak and Parko has said all he can.

'You are truly the man, Marty,' Parko says.

First days are alphabetical. Across from Marty, Claire Adams has paid and gathered her books, pencils, pencil sharpener and pens of blue, black and red. Claire has at least one of everything from the piles of books and stationery arranged behind the desk of Mr Myer.

Claire is first-day fresh in her school uniform. Her jumper is contoured across her undulating chest, which looks a little bigger than Marty remembers. Her tie is tied the right way, and fitted under a collar that has the top button fastened, because her shirt fits. Her skirt is pleated, the folds perfect. Her socks are white, with blue-and-yellow striped bands at the tops. Claire's shoes are black and shiny, so new they've never been polished.

With her pencil sharpener, Claire peels shavings from her indelible pencil. Marty inhales the potential of the naked wood as it falls to the floor. The shavings flutter, and he imagines rough-hewn butterflies, dreams falling from the tip of Claire's pencil.

Claire catches him looking at her. He sees her mark his jumper, those strange-coloured bands, wrong-schooled at neck and wrists. Marty lifts his hands to his face, places his index fingers on each side of his nose, positions his thumbs under his jaw and prays into the door of the church formed by his steepled hands. The scent of Palmolive on his palms and fingers is strong. He inhales deeply, wanting to be somewhere else, perhaps in a school on another planet, or in the kitchen at home, listening to the babble of his baby sister, or watching her as she mouths a crust smeared with apricot jam.

There are two holes in the front of his jumper that Claire will see if he places his hands on the desk.

Marty retreats into a place where he is sure his jumper was thrown away, most likely after some tom-foolery with acid in metalwork class. He travels to another planet, where the rules of the universe insist that school jumpers with holes in them are immediately replaced.

On that planet, on the first day back, every student is given a new school jumper that fits first time and has the right coloured bands at neck and wrists. On Marty's planet, no-one has to pay and when you arrive everything you need for the school year is laid out on your desk. The air is a perfume of new books and is filled with butterflies fresh-pared from the shavings of pencils. And the butterflies carry poems, written on their wings in sharp, indelible pencil, and every student is delivered at least three poems a day.

After the morning break, classes start in earnest. Mr Myer asks that students who have their books sit with someone who doesn't.

'Not you, Parkinson,' Mr Myer says. 'You and Martin sit apart in my class. Always.'

Claire Adams collects her books and with her hip pushes Marty across to the other side of his desk. She smells of something that is not Palmolive.

'You were watching me,' she says.

‘You were making butterflies.’ Marty tells her about pencil shavings and poems written in indelible pencil on the wings of butterflies.

At lunchtime, Marty and Parko sit under a huge peppercorn tree that shades the south-east corner of the school yard. Marty can feel the imprint of diamond-shaped links of wire on his back. He presses harder against the fence, and wonders if a permanent stamp of diamonds can be corrugated on his jumper. The sun radiates through gaps in the foliage of the peppercorn trees. Marty basks in a sliver of light. The air smells of peppercorns and dust.

Slim-legged, alone, Claire wanders into the corner of the yard owned by Marty and Parko. She squats next to Marty and her skirt rides up her legs. Marty hears Parko gulp.

‘What’s this?’ Claire says, and she presses a finger into one of the holes in Marty’s jumper.

‘Dunno. Metalwork maybe. You know, when you dunk the stuff you make in the acid?’

‘No.’ Claire smiles and presses further with her finger. She is caressing his bottom rib, and Marty wonders if she can feel the thrashing of his heart.

‘Moths,’ says Parko.

‘What?’ Marty can’t think. The smooth tip of Claire’s finger has penetrated his brain and is erasing everything, rubbing out who he is.

‘Moths,’ says Parko. ‘Those holes. That’s moths. Not acid.’

‘No. A butterfly,’ Claire says. ‘A butterfly flew in here,’ she wiggles her finger, ‘and came out here.’ She pushes her finger sideways and the tip of her finger pokes out of the other hole in Marty’s jumper.

‘True,’ Claire says. She keeps wiggling the finger that protrudes from Marty’s jumper. ‘A butterfly flew in, laid a poem, and flew out here.’

‘Laid a caterpillar called Marty,’ says Parko.

‘Poem, caterpillar, butterfly. When are you going to fly, Marty?’

The classroom is hotter in the afternoon. Marty peels off his jumper and hides it in his satchel. He stinks of Palmolive and sweat.

Mr Myer is writing on the blackboard. Marty can just decipher the white chalk scrawl. Tomorrow, he will have to wear his glasses. Beside him, Claire is calm, smiling, and he imagines her finger tracing the bumps and hollows of him. Marty wonders if she could create him, craft someone who isn’t quite him, but could be.

Before today, Marty hasn't noticed the skin between his thumb and forefinger, hasn't realised that there is a purpose for that vacant flesh. Claire appears transfixed by the soft, crevassed skin that breathes there. She grabs his hand and with her indelible pencil and spit draws the mouth of a shark between his thumb and forefinger. With her girl-smooth hands she gently works the jaws.

After she tires of playing with the shark, Claire presses Marty's hand flat against the scratched timber of the desk. With her pencil she traces the outline of his hand onto the wood. Her right index finger, the one that found its way into his jumper, explores the backs of his fingers and the valleys between them. She lifts his hand and puts his thumb in her mouth.

Marty closes his eyes and inhales the glory of Claire. He wonders if he can absorb the bigness and smallness of the world, a place where the grin of a shark might represent love, and the taste of apricot jam on toast and the babble of his baby sister might say the world is a kitchen.

Possibilities engulf him. Life has too many folds to comprehend. Life has too much skin.

Marty needs time to ponder it all. He wants to be on the school bus, on his way home, where he can hold his pencil in his left hand, with the stem resting against the mouth of the shark. He will compose a poem to be written in indelible pencil on the thighs of Claire Adams.

After school, Marty wanders towards the bus stop with Claire and Parko.

'Why don't we walk home?' Claire says.

'Too far,' says Parko.

Claire looks at him, then smiles at Marty. 'You live close by, don't you, Marty? Just on the edge of town?'

Parko pulls something from his pocket. He jingles a set of keys in front of Marty's eyes. 'I got Billy's keys. He's left his ute at home. Says I can drive it. Stay on the bus until our place. I'll drive you home.'

Claire's lips touch Marty's ear. 'My parents have gone to Melbourne. Won't be back till late.'

Parko says, 'I'll let you have a drive.'

'You haven't got a licence, Parko. Marty hasn't got one either.'

'So,' says Parko.

Claire presses herself against Marty's back and whispers, 'We can write stuff. On the wings of butterflies.'

The door to Claire's bedroom creaks open. Cool, vanilla-scented air pushes its way into the room. Marty doesn't turn his head from the wall. If he moves the dream will be broken, and he will wake on that other planet, in the ute with Parko.

He wonders if she has seen his breathing falter. He closes his eyes and concentrates on slow, even breaths.

Marty hears Claire sigh, then her feet moving on the floorboards. She slides something. Marty hears it grate against the top of the table. She makes a sound, the bark of a small animal. He hears the catch of a button suddenly released, then another. His satchel. She has opened his satchel and taken something out. He hears the slither of wool pulled over skin.

Claire's feet are travelling on the floorboards again. The smell of vanilla is stronger. The chair she settles in flexes suddenly. Marty hears the whisper of skin on skin as she crosses her legs. The image of the girl at the bus stop flashes into his head. *They were blue, right?*

Marty shakes his head and Claire speaks, 'It's all right, Marty.' The chair creaks again and she climbs into bed behind him. She presses herself against him. The jumper she is wearing is itchy against his naked back, but her legs are skin. Marty soars in a constellation of planets, where life can never have enough skin.

Next morning, he warms himself in front of the stove. The heat releases the scent of vanilla from his jumper and allows the memory of Claire to infiltrate the kitchen.

The apricot-jammed, skin-riddled topping on Marty's toast is perfect. He stands with his back to the stove, chewing, eyes closed, his sister mumbling in her high chair, her voice almost a foil to the intensity of the radio. As usual, the radio is loud.

A name jumps from the box on the mantelpiece into his head. A name, and he stops chewing, his mouth full.

'Parkinson. You know him?' his mother asks. Her voice is shrill.

Marty shakes his head. He can't chew or swallow. His mouth won't move.

'Parkinson. Think. You must know him. They said he was sixteen.'

Marty spits a mouthful of jam and toast and saliva into the sink. Some of the mess dribbles onto his jumper.

Outside, walking to the bus stop, he holds his satchel against the front of his jumper. Again there are butterflies, scraps of paper flicking in the wind above the growth in the side-cut. He takes a couple of steps closer. The wings of the butterflies are white with black markings, and uninterpretable.