

:fiction

to
matthew
adams

return to sender

by Elizabeth Bryer

Elizabeth Bryer's writing has previously appeared in *HEAT*, *harvest*, *Kill Your Darlings*, *Griffith Review* and *Mascara*, and has been broadcast on ABC Radio National. She lives in Melbourne, and her online home is Plume of Words.

The roof was leaking again so I helped you empty the kitchen cupboards of their battered pots and place them across the lounge-room floor. The drops were coming down like a beaded string curtain; with each pan we set in place, the tinkling intensified until I said to you, Are you hiding a glockenspiel under the couch or what?

Your mother was passed out so we knew there would be no dinner that night other than what you could scrounge together, but at least it meant she wouldn't stomp to your room and push open the door whenever you had softly shut it. No monkey business in my house, she'd said the time before. When your eyes went narrow and blood rushed to your face I told you, Don't worry, it's nice she cares. It would be better if she cared about Robbie, you said quietly, and it was the kind of quiet that made me realise why our classmates were scared of you.

A wail escaped Robbie's room. You sighed and loped down the hall, adjusting your low-slung jeans as you went. Beneath the tat-tat of the drips was the sound of your murmurs, the sound of his hiccups. You returned and removed one of the pans from the floor, told me a drip had started up over his cot and disappeared again.

It was almost eight and a school night so I had to go home. You kissed me goodbye and I went out, schoolbag held over my head to shield myself from the worst of the weather, hurrying the five blocks through the wet.

You didn't show at homeroom the next day—The roof, you told me when I called at recess. You had borrowed a silicone gun from an old guy two houses down, climbed up and patched it, but you said there were so many holes that you weren't sure you'd got them all. I imagined the corrugated iron to be like lace, imagined lying in the cavity beneath it, how the sun shining through would look like stars. In my daydream, you were beside me, and there were sequins of light all over you.

So I'll see you tomorrow?

Yeah, you said. Tomorrow. See you then.

I slipped my mobile into my pocket and held your words close.

A few days later I got an invitation to the end-of-year awards ceremony, and you got suspended for two weeks. You asked me what my award meant among all those A-worded honours (Application to Studies, Academic Achievement, Academic Excellence). I broke them down like this: You try hard, you do pretty well, you're top of the class.

You nodded. So—pretty well. After a pause, you pushed me on the arm, grinning, and said, Well if you tried, you'd get the top-of-the-class one.

Smoking was what got you suspended that day, along with the spray of graffiti across the woodwork shed. I told you they were a bunch of authoritarian

arseholes, but you shrugged it off. They had adopted a zero-tolerance policy and used words like lost cause when shaking their heads and sighing over you. The new rules are in force, they boomed out at assembly, the lot of them with their shoulders abutted like a small, earnest army.

Our classmates flitted around you. They looked at me sidelong and wondered how I had done it, how I had got under your skin, and why I'd let you get under mine. They whispered about us as if I was all set for a fall and you were all set to show me the way.

They whispered about us as if I was all set for a fall and you were all set to show me the way.

I never told you, but when we first hooked up at Jonno's party the winter before the one just gone, my stomach was churning because I'd arrived before my friends. That's what made me notice you: alone, you looked comfortable. When your eyes locked onto mine, I didn't look away. Come on, you said, and without a second thought I followed you into the night.

You hotwired a car—I didn't stop you. We thrummed through the deserted streets with the windows and vents open wide so that the dark, cool air hit us hard in the face. We sucked that air right in and watched the night and the lights rush at us.

But it wasn't until a few weeks later that I knew how much I liked you. It was the first time you came to watch me play. You sat right in the middle, between the flautist's mother and the trombonist's grandfather, and fixed your gaze on me. I missed notes and tripped out of time: the xylophone, timpani and glockenspiel became lumps of wood, steel and skin; my mallets, sticks. The keyboard player kept frowning at me, and the conductor soldiered on. Later, you told me it was beautiful, said my percussion was the detail that really made the songs. When you said those words—well, that was when I knew.

Mum's got a new boyfriend, you told me a few days after your suspension started. I asked you what you'd been doing these past school-free days. You shrugged. I'd seen your tag across new walls around town so I knew part of the story, knew how you'd been occupying your nights. My nights were supervised, controlled: no one slept as lightly as my mother.

The next time I went to your place there was a ute parked outside your house. It had 'Runs on Rum' in the back window, and the suspension was jacked up. Your mother was leaning against the kitchen bench; she waved me in distractedly

as I wiped my shoes. A guy was standing, feet planted wide, on the linoleum in the kitchen. Your mother's eyes were sparkling, and at intervals she erupted into trilling giggles. I went through to your room.

Let's get out of here, I told you before you'd even kissed me. Let's go see the country, I said. You're getting your licence soon; we could go fruit picking or something.

I was imagining a second-hand station wagon, the radio up loud, my feet on the dash. We would sleep in the back of the car and pocket all the cash we cared to work for.

You were silent a long moment. For the summer?

No, I told you, let's go now and not come back.

You hesitated again. But what about the conservatorium the year after next?

I don't like percussion as much as I thought, I said. I don't want to go to the city as much as I thought. Actually, I'm not that keen on going to uni at all anymore.

You frowned and made a noise. I waited, but that was it. You pulled me to your chest and kissed my hair. After a time you spoke, but it was just to ask me how my day had been.

A few days later there was a faint shade of purple fanning from the outer corner of your right eye. My hands are always cool, so I rested my fingertips on it, but you flinched and I withdrew them. It

was almost beautiful, the colour, in the way that some things can be beautiful because they hurt. I wondered what note it would be and realised as soon as I'd wondered that it would be a B flat.

When I asked you what happened, you said it didn't matter. Our classmates took one look and gave you an even wider berth.

You didn't want me to come home with you that day, but I always did on Thursdays so I ignored your excuses and kept up my pace alongside you. On your verandah were two of the kitchen chairs, broken and lying on their sides. There was a hole in one of the lounge-room walls. Robbie was home alone, standing up in his cot and sucking on his blanket, his eyes wide and glistening.

How'd that hole get there? I asked. You had picked up Robbie and were holding him close, bouncing softly on your toes, your mouth pressed into his hair.

I did it, you said. You took Robbie to the kitchen and spread some peanut butter across a slice of Wonder White. Once Robbie had eaten, his eyelids drooped, so we went to your room and tucked him into your bed.

The bang of the front door sounded, and his taunts carried to us: Where's the moody little fuckwit got to?

Out the window, you told me, and I laughed because you couldn't be serious. But you had already crossed the room and were heaving the window upwards. Come on, you said.

I saw that you were scared, so I did as I was told. You lifted me, and I scrambled through and landed with a thud on the overgrown grass. Behind me, the window was slid down with a snap that was almost an affront. I stood, brushed off my clothes and headed for home.

It was ten months and fourteen days before word came—it was on one of those lame touristy postcards.

It took me a week to work up the courage. My mother didn't approve of your tattoo, your table manners or your aversion to small talk, so I didn't know how to ask. I took a deep breath and thought, I can do this. Then I said more sharply than I had intended, Mum. (She was reading in the lounge room, legs crossed.) Straight away she looked up at me, setting the magazine aside, and said, What is it, darling? That's all it took: I tried to keep the feeling in, but I couldn't help it—I was such a baby—and between one sob and the next she was beside me and had taken me into her arms.

Shhh, she said. It's OK, whatever it is; it's OK, and she pressed my face to her collarbone and stroked my hair like she used to when I was little, and soon I had told her how worried I was about you, and she said, Of course, darling, of course he can stay here, and relief relaxed the stiffness of my body in her hold, and then she added, But he will be in his own room, and there will have to be some rules set down, and I thought, God she's lame, but I held in the groan.

It was all I could do not to grin stupidly or pinch myself when you emerged the next morning. You, in my house, the two of us sharing breakfast together, getting ready for school together, walking there together.

After the final bell, I couldn't find you, so after waiting ten more minutes I set out for home. You were sitting on the verandah when I arrived, tossing a tennis ball from one hand to the other. You were quiet as you followed me into the house; I threw down my bag and opened and closed the fridge and pantry door, then started putting away the dishes with as much clattering as I could get away with.

You pulled out one of the kitchen chairs and sat on it.

I went to check on Robbie, you said, and you started tossing the ball again, back and forth, back and forth. I stopped my banging about and watched your face.

I peered through a side window, you said. Mum was with him. I think, you said, I think she might actually be taking care of him now that I'm not there.

You leant back in the chair and tossed the ball above your head. Your sad eyes followed its arc.

The carnies blew into town—injected the classroom with talk of who was going to the show that weekend and who had permission to stay late for the fireworks—and blew out again. When they were gone, so were you. I called you, but your mobile shrilled from the room you'd been sleeping in.

It was ten months and fourteen days before word came—it was on one of those lame touristy postcards. You didn't give me details, just said you'd got a job and you were OK. The postmark told me you'd sent it from Katherine; it arrived a week ago, and the date on the postmark is now three weeks old.

After you upped and left, the slow turn of summer was exhausting—the heat clingy, making me claustrophobic even when I went outside. That's your fault: you know summer's my favourite time of year. Autumn and winter were B flat seasons. I guess you haven't had either where you are. It's clear we're into the final leg of Year Twelve now. There's a jittery seriousness in the classroom, and there are nervous giggles and focused frowns before every test.

The day after I got word from you, I slipped out of the house when night came. I waited until two—the time when I guessed that even light sleepers must be tangled in dreams—and I wore a hoodie you had left behind and took one of my mother's golf clubs. Once I was outside your house, I did it quickly. The shattering of glass, the caving-in of metal were loud. With every blow I thought he'd come out and I'd be caught. I took a nervous moment to admire my handiwork and to imagine his face when he saw his ride like that. And then I sprinted away, the cool night air rushing at me, and me sucking it in.

I'm sending this to the post office you sent the postcard from, just to let you know what I did. If you recognise yourself in the above, then you're the right Matthew Adams, and now you know what I've done. Bet you never thought I'd do something like that.

Also, fuck you. Why did you leave me? And don't send me another shitty postcard—call me next time.

If it isn't you, then please give this back to the post-office people and ask them to pass it on to the next Matthew Adams who comes in. And so on and so forth, down the line, until the Matthew Adams reading this is my Matthew Adams. Until he has read it and he knows.