

'Precious Cargo' by Ellie Kaddatz
Second runner up
2021 Young Writers Award

Precious Cargo

Your first memories are coloured by a secret rage. There is sorrow, too, and disappointment like a chocolate stain on your child-clothes, but mostly you are good and quiet and angry. You hate pink, hate dolls, hate skirts, hate the secrets that being a girl brings. Your brothers love dinosaurs, so you decide you also love dinosaurs, even though you remember being too frightened to touch the Muttaburrasaurus statue on a pub corner in Hughenden.

Girl-child that you are, you are gifted books about horses and ballet. Relatives buy your brothers books on the ages of the dinosaurs, Permian to Cretaceous, a dinosaur A-Z, piles of picture books full of spines and scales and skeletons. You are a vicious and voracious reader. In your head, the names sing and swirl. *Diplodocus, plesiosaur, stegosaurus, triceratops* ... Stop. Rip your hand from the page.

There is a scale in the bottom right corner. Here is the size of a tricycle. Here is the size of a grown-up. Here is the size of a school bus. Here is the size of an *Argentinosaurus*. Your heart is in your mouth. You can feel the blood vessels pumping against your tongue. The carpet under your scabbed knees smells like vomit and banana lollies. You fist at the splotted fibres.

Fool-child. You have always been afraid of big things. Big things and getting old. When you are forced to learn that your dad is not the biggest thing in the world, that there are single rib bones thicker than his strong, warm chest, something cold and slimy and scared will cry out from inside of you.

The air in the Pioneer Valley at dusk is full of smoke from cane trash fires. The purple light signals the arrival of your dad, and you watch your mother taste the air for conflict with her sharp tongue when he walks through the door.

“Hey darl,” he says, kicking off his heavy boots in the hallway. “How’re ya going?”

“Sweetheart.” She smiles with a mouth full of spit. “No overtime this weekend?”

“Nah, Terry’s missus is about ready to have the baby.”

You don’t give her time to react. Your brothers have already started clattering down the hall, towards the deep thrum of your father’s voice, but you get there first.

“Hey mate,” he says, hoisting you into the air. “Been helping Mum with tea?”

Even with your head nestled into his neck you feel her stiffen on the couch.

“I haven’t made tea yet,” she begins, and there’s a bite in her voice. “I just got home from work and I’ve had to put four grotty kids through the shower.”

“Hon, that’s fine. I was just asking if-”

“I’ll go start it now, since I clearly don’t need to sit down and rest for a minute.”
You hear reptilian scales slide out of the room.

Your dad’s shoulders tense under your chubby fingers. He lowers you onto the beige carpet like precious cargo and you immediately miss the salty, smoky smell of his skin.

“Go set the table, kids,” he says, and strides down the hallway. Pots bang together in the kitchen. Disgust twists quickly in your stomach. You quite possibly hate her, you think, and this settles into the coal seam of your bones.

You are on a rusted school bus at dawn. Sump oil from the line marking on the oval makes the air heavy and mechanic. You are freckled and gangly and full of an anger that freezes you from the inside out. You are known for never crying. When your chest constricts and your eyes prick with salt, you think of your mother and her terrible feelings, and you suck it in, shove it down, picture your dad pitching a tent. He is recently an underground miner, and he comes home after every seven-day tour with black smudged around his eyes and a night-shift temper.

Your mother packed you two jumpers and you give both away to your blonde, pretty friends. Their breath is mist spewing from their open, frog-like mouths. They pretend they are smoking cigarettes. In this town, they probably do, though they aren't yet eleven.

You have spent three cramped hours on that bus. It rattles to a halt in a dirt truck stop and children clatter out, giggles and dibber-dobbing silenced as they try to grasp what they are seeing.

It is a yellow dump truck, exactly like the toy your brother runs along the carpet with his pudgy hands, but it is the size of a mountain. The Peak Downs Highway, the Route 66 of the Central Queensland coal mines, cuts through your small, small town. You have been in the car when your mother has pulled over for semi-trailers, garlanded with OVERSIZED and carrying tyres bigger than your bedroom. But no one ever explained that these tyres belong to trucks built to scale; that there are trucks that are bigger than your house, than your friend's house that's double-storied and stares stonily out over kilometres of sugar cane.

You are not tall enough to even touch the centre cap. You look up at the machine and taste bile, spicy and green in your throat. It is too big, too much, too desperate. You are unable to explain this or even think about it and you stand frozen in its terrible shadow. Your intestines are black in your gut, your tongue loose in your mouth. Later that day, in the bus, a Mintie pulls out your upper right first molar and before the pain hits you have already bitten down on the tooth. You have tried to crush your own bone and enamel and bacteria. You spit white and grey and red into a tissue and you do not cry.

Dawn, noon, dusk, night, trucks groan down the highway, the black stretch of bitumen visible from the windows of the bedroom you share with your brothers. Their high-beam headlights shoot through gum trees onto the bedroom wall and it takes you years to learn to ignore the way the patterns spread like portents and prophecies. Your child-hands can't do anything to make them stop. Sometimes you lay in the backyard, put your ear to the dry grass, and listen to their overloaded trailers and their compression

brakes and think surely *this* is enough disruption, surely *this* is enough pressure over nature, surely *this* is enough to make people other than you curl up in bed and stifle sticky sobs.

It must not be enough.

Your house evolves as the mining boom peaks. Your brothers move down the hall. You sleep alone in a room that now seems too large, too empty. There is no door, only thin curtains that no one can knock on, and so the room is an arena and you are prized bull and matador alike. Every night you listen to your mother ready herself for bed in the next room and fold herself into her soft, king-sized sheets alone.

The mines still don't seem quite real to you, their scale and their damage and your father's room at camp. Your grasp on what he actually does while he's away is tenuous. You know he is under hundreds of metres of earth. You know he finds deep satisfaction in a job well done. You know he is angry, often, with the other men out there, the ones who work above-ground in ergonomic office chairs and talk about productivity rather than practicality. When he comes home, tired and aching, you think perhaps he is scared, and you push this down with all your other snake-like teenage instincts. He cannot be frightened. He is a whole planet, and planets have no business driving the solar system off-course.

The shopping centres in town mutate to hold more people, more product. Your mother spends hours tracking along the immaculate tiles in Myer, trying to get you to bite. The dance between you is intricate and intimate.

"This would be perfect for Kay's wedding," she says, holding up a garment that hangs limply like a washed-up bluebottle.

"Mum, you don't need any more dresses," you say, and it's true; her clothes are packed tight as secrets in her cupboard. "Dad said we need to stop spending so much money."

Her grip on the coathanger turns her knuckles white. "I work as well. It's my money too. Besides, I meant for you to wear. But if you don't like it, that's fine. It looks like they only have it in small sizes anyway."

She shoves the dress back onto the rack and walks away, the wheels on the trolley clacking. You swallow unevenly, throat burning, and readjust the hanger so the dress hangs neatly with its clones.

You are sitting in the back of your parents' car and your dad is muttering at the Brisbane city traffic while your mother huffs and stares pointedly out her window. One of your brothers, the youngest, the spindly-legged one, has his head leant back against the car seat, earphones spewing. The car draws closer to the intersection and you are about to say, "Dad, move over a lane," your soft mouth parting, when he speaks.

"What the bloody hell is going on now?"

The lights have turned green and no cars are moving. The lights have turned green and the intersection is full of people waving banners and chanting slogans you've heard on the news and read in hashtag form on Instagram stories. The lights have turned green and their t-shirts are green and they want to stop Adani.

Before your dad even catches up to what's happening, your hands are shaking and your heart is plump like an unbitten apple in your chest. You know what's coming, know it's something big, something you will never be able to hold between your two tiny, insignificant hands. In your twenty-something years you have never learnt to handle confrontation. Your kind and patient dad has only learnt how to let it explode all the more.

You sit there for two minutes, maybe three, but you feel as if you haven't breathed for eons. Cars are honking, now, their drivers yelling. The protesters, young and bright-eyed, go from car to car with donation buckets. One is heading for you. Your father has rolled down his window to yell and shoots the boy a glare.

"I wouldn't come any closer, mate, if ya know what's good for ya."

The boy must be used to this, must somehow know how to pick his way through the thick mess of anger that has been directed his way, and just smiles and nods. "No worries!" he says cheerfully, and continues on to the next car in line.

Several times, your father – for that’s what he is here, in this story, he isn’t *Dad*, is he? – unbuckles his seatbelt and puts a thick hand on the door handle. Your mother pulls him back, shushes his complaints, but slowly loses her patience as the traffic stays stopped.

“I work at Adani,” your father shouts as the boy walks past again, though he doesn’t, not really, his mine is in Moranbah. “You bloody city folk need to learn how the world works.”

A woman in the car next to you leans out her window and waves to your mother. “My husband works out there too,” she calls, droll and unworried. “These kids have no fuckin’ clue.”

You sit paralysed in your childhood car spot, behind the driver’s seat, and you are unable to swallow or blink. Your brother sees you frozen, fat tears falling down your inflated face, and rolls his eyes, carbon-copy of your mother in front of him. He pushes his earphones back in and closes his eyes.

The back of your father’s neck is crimson and dripping with sweat. You want to reach a cooling hand to it, soothe him, inhale all the petrol fumes and send everyone home to bed. The aircon blows your father’s deodorant back at you and you cling, cling, cling to the memories the scent brings.

He reaches again for the handle, and you know your mother won’t stop him this time, though she flaps her hands and says, “Hon, there’s news cameras, just be patient.”

His grip on the handle is unforgiving, and your brain is a hunk of petrified wood. The knowledge that you cannot fix this slices through you like a hot, keen blade.

“Dad, please,” you choke. It is only when he looks at you that he notices the panic and the despair and the desperation coming from the very bones of you. He is so angry that he can’t reply, just swallow harshly. But his fingers drop from the handle, and you know he has learnt something irrevocable about you. Your feelings have outgrown you and speared him like your mother’s and you are wretchedly, stupidly sorry.

You aren’t scared of him, could never be, but you are scared of this.

It is midnight, never pitch-black in the bush but silver-lit by the Milky Way's blazing streaks. You sit in your hybrid car and tap your slim fingers against the slick steering wheel. Mozzies whine in your ears.

The passenger door swings open and the car blazes with yellow light. Your father heaves himself into the passenger seat, tree-trunk legs pressing against the vinyl, heart engorged in his chest. He closes the door with a slow tenderness. You both sit bone-quiet as the interior lights fade.

"You know your mother means well, mate," he starts, and it's going to kill you to say this next bit, going to scoop your insides out from the hole between your shoulder blades. You wouldn't mind that, wouldn't mind the killing, but it's going to kill him too. Your father, dad, daddy. You can't even fiddle with the keys in the ignition; it's a push-button start and they are in your pocket, digging into your skeleton hip.

"Dad," you say, and you are choking already, methane and coal dust bringing up bile in your throat. "I'm not leaving because of her."

A second ticks. Maybe that will be enough for him. Maybe he won't make you say it. Maybe it will be alright and you will nestle back into your childhood bed and watch the highway headlights flash through the curtain-framed window and eventually drift to sleep under the eucalypt shadows. Maybe he will look you in your adult-eyes and nod and say he's sorry and leave the car and you will sidle back into the house and make a teapot and the two of you will sit there until dawn in mutual, inevitable understanding.

He swallows, looks away. He makes you say it. You are crushing his huge body in your well-proportioned hands. When you are finished your father lies crumpled in your lap. You drop his bones on the side of the highway while an oversized truck passes you, inland-bound.