

EXTRACT 1 for Section A (Reading Skills): 'Railhead' by Philip Reeve

The following extract is taken from 'Railhead', which describes a future where intelligent trains travel beyond the stars. Here, Zen, a young petty thief, is trying to escape from a drone that is following him and enters a station where the trains depart for other planets.

Zen went through the entrance barriers and ran out onto the platform. The Express was just pulling in... Zen kept his place in the scrum of other K-bahn travellers, itching to look behind him, but knowing that he mustn't because, if the drone was there, it would be watching for just that: a face turned back, a look of guilt.

The doors slid open. He shoved past disembarking passengers into a carriage. It smelled of something sweet, as if the train had come from some world where it was springtime. Zen found a window seat and sat there looking at his feet, at the ceramic floor, at the patterns on the worn seat coverings, anywhere but out of the window, which was where he most wanted to look. His fellow passengers were commuters and a few Motorik couriers with their android brains stuffed full of information for businesses further down the line. In the seats opposite Zen lounged a couple of rich kids: railheads from K'mbussi or Galaghost, pretty as 3D stars, dozing with their arms around each other. Zen thought about taking their bags with him when he got off, but his luck was glitchy tonight and he decided not to risk it.

The train began to move, so smoothly that he barely noticed. Then the lights of Ambersai Station were falling behind, the throb of the engines was rising, the backbeat of the wheels quickening. Zen risked a glance at the window. At first it was hard to make anything out in the confusion of carriage reflections and the city lights sliding by outside. Then he saw the drone again. It was keeping pace with the train, shards of light sliding from its rotor blades as it burred along at the window height, aiming a whole spider-cluster of eyes and cameras and who-knew-what at him.

The train rushed into a tunnel, and he could see nothing any more except his own skinny reflection, wide cheekbones fluttering with the movement of the carriage, eyes big and empty as the eyes on moths' wings.

The train accelerated. The noise rising, rising, until, with a soundless bang - a kind of *un-bang* - it tore through the K-gate and everything got reassuringly weird. For a timeless moment Zen was outside of the universe. There was a sense of falling, although there was no longer any down to fall to. Something that was not quite light blazed in through the blank windows...

Then another un-bang, and the train was sliding out of another ordinary tunnel, slowing towards another everyday station. It was bright daytime on this world, and the gravity was lower. Zen relaxed into his seat, grinning. He was imagining that drone turning away in defeat from the empty tunnel on Ambersai, a thousand light years away.

EXTRACT 2 for Section A (Reading Skills): A poem by John Agard

**What the teacher said when asked:
What Er We Avin for Geography, Miss?**

This morning I've got too much energy
much too much for geography

I'm in a high mood
so class don't think me crude
5 but you can stuff latitude and longitude

I've had enough of the earth's crust
today I want to touch the clouds

Today I want to sing out loud
and tear all maps to shreds

10 I'm not settling for river beds
I want the sky and nothing less

Today I couldn't care if east turns west
Today I've got so much energy
I could do press-ups on the desk
15 but that won't take much out of me

Today I'll dance on the globe
In a rainbow robe

while you class remain seated
on your natural zone
20 with your pens and things
watching my contours⁽¹⁾ grow wings

All right, class, see you later.
If the headmaster asks for me
say I'm a million dreaming degrees
25 beyond the equator

a million dreaming degrees
beyond the equator

Glossary: ⁽¹⁾contours – lines on a map

