



BOAT PEOPLE

To my Mum and Dad





Also by Tim Jones

Short Fiction
Extreme Weather Events







Boat People

Tim Jones

*“You New Zealanders—
you’re all ‘boat people’”*
— Mai Ky

HEADWORX
WELLINGTON





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I







Haast Pass Poem

The sky's got to grips with the
ground here, sensing some weakness,
a cleavage in the breastworks

Rangi and Papa, he
whistling through her clenched rock teeth
splitting the silence with water
She bared to the bone, obdured
to give no further

Papa and Rangi, she oozing
life in this broken place, he
barren past her borders





Oreti Beach

Do you remember
the gulls
and the wind flinging spray in your face?

I have a picture of you there
in that coat
with the hood down and your hair blowing

You stand and stare out to sea
where the sun,
orange, sinks down over Riverton

I see you turn, shouting something
to Mum
and scamper off into the sandhills

In the lee of the dunes, it's quiet
safe and warm
and you ramble the sand's secret pathways

You turn a corner, arms outstretched
and are gone
like the sun, and the gulls you heard calling





Stones

Here, standing on the beach, is Dad.
Beach? It's Riverton, rocks and gravel
from the tarmac to the grey sea's edge.

Black and white. He holds an oblate stone
scoured out from the distant Alps
milled and rolled by frigid water.

He holds it poised for skimming. Out
it will arc, skip, skip, to fall
and sink for half a fathom.

I snapped him with my old Box Brownie. His eyes
look far beyond the frame I gave him.
Shadowed from the sun, impassive,
they are skipping over the years,
walking the waves to England.





Gore Housewives' Choice

You could wander round the shops —
there's a special on today —
offer crumbs to the birds.
You could clean the house.

You could watch TV, read a book.
Ring up your children —
never cheaper, never closer —
and ask them how they are.

But nothing makes this England.
You had a home there, once,
but the wellsprings of your life
dried up above those miles of water.

Gore Housewives' Choice:
Nothing, or nothing at all.





Fallen

Driving through Mandeville. Empty windows, empty houses,
a craft shop sprung like fungus from the bones of the dying town.



The cenotaph stands roadside. Blunt, unwearied,
it commends to our attention the names of the anxious dead.

They grew, these Southland towns, on the graves
of the children of Tane. Mandeville, Riversdale —
Myross Bush, Ryal Bush, Gummies' ...

the land groaned with the weight of their money.
As the tribes were pushed to the margins, fat lambs
grew fatter. Knives flashed cold on the chains;
eels tumbled and writhed over offal.

Now, thistles nod in the hard-pan fields. Children
are a letter from the city, a ten-hour drive at Easter.
The wealth
went with them. No mirror glass monuments here.

But the Council keeps the graveyard clean; and our dust
settles impartially
on the sign: "Country Crafts — Buy Here!"
and the sign that their dead live on, and will do so,
chiselled in stone,
till new trees and new ferns drag them down.



Something for the Weekend

Come Friday night
you and that brother of yours
will be back on the dance floor,
cautious, keeping to the margins,
seeking something for the weekend.

You nudge him: “There.” She’s
appropriate
body shimmering in lycra, eyes
alive, amused, resigned.

He asks; she nods; they dance
Invitations flicker between them
defining the intersection
of delusion, need, desire.

As they head for the door
he cuffs your shoulder. “Go get ’em, tiger.”
You look, but no,
she hasn’t got a sister. You down your drink,
grimace, turn and leave.

Later, as you dream of fingernails and frantic hips
they fall apart at last. She rises, showers,
has to go. They kiss. “This evening?”
“Sorry, no.”



They'll see each other round
and he'll meet you
same time, same place
tomorrow.





If Looks Could Kill

When the woman gave me a look
back over her shoulder
I went and crossed the road

it was dark and poorly lit
I didn't want to scare her
and I didn't mean any harm

well, none of us do,
but we're clumsy
we break things and people

that's the way it is
that's the fact of the matter
look, we were made that way

and the most they do is look
but they'd have done with us long since
if looks could kill





North

On Ilkley Moor
I parked me red
Ford Laser hatchback
and gazed to the north.
Rain and smoke stood over Wharfedale

It was all in its appointed place:
stone houses and stone smiles in Ilkley
the wind on the bleak
insalubrious bracken

I was waiting for memory
to make the scene complete:
some flat-vowelled voice out of childhood
snatches of Northern song

For memory read TV:
Tha've broken tha poor Mother's heart.
It were only a bit of fun.
Bowl slower and hit bloody stumps.

Tha'll never amount to much, lad. In cloth cap and gaiters,
car forgotten, I pedal down the hill. Hurry oop
or tha'll be late for mill. Folk say
I've been seeing the young widow Cleghorn.
Well, now, fancy that.



In my invented character
I trail my falsified heritage
down the long, consoling streets.





Aramoana Border Post

“Dunedin, that’s a fact!”
said the smelter proponents
It wasn’t and would never be

Our border post was a fact:
a jaunty little hut
perched on the dirty haunches of the road

“Welcome to the Independent State of Aramoana!”
We had passports, visa stamps, the lot
We stood outside in white coats and flagged down passing cars

asked them their purpose, invited their support
a dollar here or there to save the salt marsh, the houses
the sandbar and the incandescent dunes

We were an enterprising bunch. We had sent letters
to Zurich, Paris, Auckland
promising trouble should the corporations ever get this far

They never did. Market failure or a failure of nerve
kept them away. There would be other darkness
but the place itself remains

lonely, unpolluted:
Bear Rock, the dunes, the salt marsh
The low and sand-choked pathways of the sea



Smaills Beach

Drowning
is the work of a moment and a lifetime

A lifetime of failing to swim
a moment of inattention

Smaills Beach, and the swell is rising
Southerly and a flowing wind

Too rough to swim, even for the swimmers:
we stand and breast the waves

One moment, I'm in my depth
the next, a surge, and I'm not:

Swept into a hollow instead, the air
two feet above my straining head

I jump and wave and jump again
then drift, unseeing, downwards

I jump and wave and jump again.
Feet churn the waves towards me





They drag me out
they pump me full of air

they press me down amid the lupins.
Later, slumped in the back of the car

watching them buy me an ice cream
I think of my lonely brother

head battered by the rocks, heart
beating in the rhythm of the tide

Smaills Beach, where I split in two:
the traveller, and the one who calls him home.





N.E.V.

So few ways out of the narrow valley
so many footprints along North Road

Sliding down Blacks Road on the black ice
off to work through the hoarfrost of morning

Walking the dog at Chingford Park
parking the car at Bethune's Gully

There's a photo I still look at:
twenty years ago now, four of us under the pines

ready to climb Mt Cargill
on a still afternoon in summer

Twenty years on, and we're scattered
two of us walking the hilltops of Wales

me in Wellington, wondering
when it will truly feel like home

and the dog in the soil
of a house in North-East Valley

pushing up the daisies, and the frost,
and the life that flickers on the hillside's bones





Seventeen Years

Seventeen years of journeys and returning.
Arriving from Gore, departing for the capital
with a host of smaller movements in between.

The first time was a big adventure.
My Dad drove up from Southland
and got stuck in the one-way system.

It was all new to us then. Circling around
too proud to ask for directions
we were dwarfed by the ivory towers

which soon became old friends. Microbugs, Biochem —
systems of hallway and lab. Passing, repassing,
I consigned them to the background

but still craned to see the Harbour
as the bus chugging northwards from Southland
sped downhill from Lookout Point.

I moved north in the end. It was Waitati Valley —
beyond Mt Cargill's caul of cloud — or Wellington.
I chose love over love for the land

and left from a terminal sodden with tears.
The clouds parted. The sun farewelled the rooftops
and the land took its place in the sea.





Seventeen years. Boyhood to manhood, black hairs to grey
Saddle Hill to a shadow
all sharp in memory, and when I cast around for home.





II







Please Advise Soonest

The honey in a bowl at the foot of the bed
who left it there?

The taste of wet hair on the tip of my tongue
who placed it there?

The trail of fresh sweat down the back of my thigh
what put it there?

The note on a napkin I pinned to my wall
who wrote it there?

The scarf down the side of an overstuffed chair
who left it there?

The question that nags in my brain unresolved
what holds me here?





Walking Down and Out

You never have enough bedclothes

and I don't know how you stand that waterbed.
Does your new lover mind the stains?

At least I won't have to navigate your stairs again in the dark
or listen to you complain about your flatmates

at least you won't have to hear me snore.

The back door needs fixing. You should remember that.
I closed it as firmly as I could
took a last look around the garden
was secretly relieved you wouldn't be coming to the airport

then walked down your front steps and off along the street.
The airport bus was late. I stood and faced the wind.

The plane was late too. Did you get my letter?





Cities for Lovers

Banks of rivers
botanical gardens
the Basin Reserve
the shade of trees

Unmade beds
made from beds
that were made an hour before;
sofas, couches
chaises longue and easy chairs;

not alleys
not lobbies
not motel rooms
no need:

lovers in cities
are well provided
for country matters





The Weather

The weather is a matter of cultural safety
for us white Englishmen

I talk about it with my father:
it's fine up here, Dad, not a breath of wind
(so rare for Wellington)
how's it with you?

Cloudy, he replies, and raining
wind from the south-west
I can't get the garden done.
In his voice is the gloomy assurance
that more is on the way

I talk about it with the barber
We agree it's
not such a bad day
for this time of the year

We're talking the prices of houses
I tell him I'll be a father come June
I don't tell him, the child will be born in winter
as the wind and the rain prowl outside





I don't tell him, we will carry the infant
back to our wooden house
shaken by the gale

I do say, I'll have to check the gutters
come spring.





They Babies Will Cry

She has lined the babies up on the shelf
A row of makeshift children: cars, dolls, a twist of coloured cloth.
She is the mother, giver of care,
doling out bottles and cuddles and sleep
till one cries and sets the whole lot off again.
She frowns and orders silence. No use.
“They babies will cry,” she says.

Row upon row of babies, shelf after shelf
stretching away into darkness.
The crying is muffled by distance, by our inattentive ears.
Who cares? There’s someone pacing the rows,
checking cots. The light still shines from her eyes,
though her rounds appear endless. I smile and wave
as she passes by. “They babies will cry.” I agree.





Action Man Is Sleeping

Action Man is sleeping
wearing his yellow bobble hat
(taken from a fluffy bunny who won't be needing it again)
blue underpants which keep him rated "G"
and two cloth nappies which serve him well as sheets

His bed is a wheeled wooden trolley.
My son, who's sleeping too, said Action Man should have
a bed with legs, like him — but Action Man
must always be ready for action
even in his jut-jawed dreams

He (my son, that is — I wouldn't
want you to get confused) has decided
he should not be kissed or hugged
"Not by you — not by anyone!"
We blamed Action Man at first

but now the boy's relented —
he can kiss us
we just can't kiss him.





At The Gate

This morning
at the kindergarten gate
my son said "You stop there!"

He didn't want me to come in
He would place his bag
on Hook 22
put his name tag on the chart
go in to mat-time by himself

He opened the gate, turned, and waved goodbye
I waved back proudly
and started down the path
close to tears

He was so tiny once
that I could hold him in the palm of one hand
He starts school in two weeks' time
His bag will fill with books
his heart with other friends.
Smiling and crying, I take the long road home.





Oh baby, when you're near me I feel like
writing a song called "Oh Baby, When You're
Near Me I Feel Like Bryan Adams"



And I want to play bad guitar
and sing off-key
in a croaky voice
and shout through megaphones;

and join good causes
and climb on stage
with Peter Gabriel and Sting

and Tracy Chapman. And make
pots of money
so we can settle down
have kids

and tell them
(we've told you once already)
to shut the window
and **TURN THAT BLOODY RACKET DOWN!**





Confidence Men

I have lost mine
and all the people I know
have lost theirs as well.
Our faces are glum
We are off our food
We stand unseeing in the street.

Who has taken it?
The confidence men.
They dress in charcoal suits
They eat power breakfasts
and tell each other: friends,
confidence is down
we must inform the nation.

They tell Paul Holmes and Morning Report
They tell Standard and Poors
Then they go for lunch.
Waiter, they say, champagne!
And waiter, please, the bill.
But when it comes
they've gone: skipped the country
and left the rest of us to pay.



Spines of Pioneers

The spines of pioneers are straight
They stand tall like Taranaki
like the trees on Taranaki
like the mist that feathers upwards from the trees

The eyes of pioneers are bright
with the cleansing fire
that burns away guilt
and leaves pasture

The clothes of pioneers are shabby
They go to town to replace them
saying, there will be a ball
and we must look our best

there will be soldiers present
from the regiment
and a match for our Jessie
will surely be made

There are needles then and whispering
in the darkness of the boarding house
The voices of pioneers are low
under these alien skies





and the land is silent
but for ghosts
wailing
and the boots that trample old bones

The voices of pioneers are merry
at the ball, with the redcoats
so bold, and our Jessie
who glows as she whirls as she dances

The carriages of pioneers are lonely
on the road homeward
with weary eyes closing
and hooves striking sparks from the stones

The homes of pioneers await them
and the walls and the firelight
shut out the broken land
and the voices that wail there

The spines of pioneers are straight
They stand tall like flagpoles
tall like gallows
tall like soldiers riding up from the sea





III







Russian River

Russian River. A name on the map now, north of the Golden Gate.

The stream curves to meet the sea. The fur traders make their camp. Volodya and Ivan climb to the top of the ridge.

The city fills the valley, a carpet of dust and rubies. Game is scarce among the towers. A few stragglers will go in the pot and never be noticed.

Ivan has departed. He had never quite grown accustomed to cars.

Volodya lies down by the water. He watches the fog roll in. He thinks about the old ones, the shadows in the forest. Then the Spanish: he sees them all around. The other day, begging by the roadside, he heard them talking. He held out his cup — *por favor?* They did not give.

The Spanish, then, have come to reclaim this land. The old ones will be back eventually. Then there will be just the wind, and the river.



1917

A hard day's plotting gives a man a thirst.
For Lenin, it's something dark and strong,
a Black Mac for his blackest moods
Trotsky can't decide: maybe an Export
maybe something brewed with ice.

"V. I. —"

"Wait on, Leon, just the dregs to go." A pause,
the glug and swish of beer. "Aaah. That's better.
You were saying?"

Trotsky looks up, face serious
above a thin moustache of foam. "V. I.,
why don't we just take over?
The Tsar could never stop us. He's
still chugging Lion Red from cans."

It's settled. Trotsky will inspire the workers
Lenin will fuel the revolution
with crates of Lowenbrau
smuggled in from Zurich by sealed train

Drink deep, Leon. Bottoms up, Vladimir Illyich.
Life will never look this simple or this clear again.



For Anna Akhmatova

Darkness is churning the air with its wings
From the left-hand door, soldiers emerge;
they are clad in black with silver boots
My friend has left for the country

In the courtyard, an old bicycle stands silent
Rustflowers dot its spokes and spine
Boots splinter ice on the concrete
Someone is climbing the iron stairs

The windows of the train are boarded over
but the smell of silage seeps in through cracks
We are travelling north-east, as I had feared
When the train stops, will my friend be waiting?





342

I will use my hands for reading,
my lips for tracing ovals on your skin.
The milk of my eyes will serve well
in the bitter years for kindness.

44





Let Loose the Red Rooster

“To let loose the red rooster” = Russian folk term for arson

Let loose the red rooster. See him
climb above the street, wings
scraping chalked-on signs from doors.

Let loose the red rooster. Hear him
crash through the forest, making candles
of the gloomy pines.

Let loose the red rooster. Taste fear.
From beneath a nervous finger
see him rise to crow defiance at the stars.

Let loose the red rooster. Smell smoke.
Touch ashes soft as feathers. Lie hidden
in the shadow of his burning wing.





The Wonderful and Frightening World

The world is changing
and we watch, in delight and fascination
as the rock of ages crumbles
and the drop of water liquefies the stone

When the tide is running this swift
surging in across the flat grey beach of
European life, all one can do is run
and then, overtaken, seek to float

Where will it, where will we, end up?
We are deep in a sea of wreckage,
rejoicing, drinking champagne. Our guards
can only watch their mausoleums fall

In the clamour, none of us have noticed
a figure drifting in the darkness,
waving his arm, blue numbers tattooed on his wrist
mouthing "Remember!" at us all.





The stars, Natasha

Natasha, fundamentals are strong,
key indicators steady.
Leave your books, Natasha,
let your computer
draw patterns on its screen.

Walk with me through the heavens.
Along cold orbits
the spendthrift stars
squander their assets on light.
The World Bank

is unamused; the IMF
is noting down their names.
So take my hand
let's drift away
into the cosmic background.





Frida Kahlo

Frida Kahlo
I am your secret sister
Rivera says I have your eyes and skin.

Who knows me knows my troubles
Trotsky was my lover
He ran over my Chihuahua with his velocipede.

Now I'm crouching in your garden
watching through the lilies
the flowers of torment strewn around your bed.

Now I'm starting on a series
of self-portraits with accretions: tins of paint, cans of fruit,
the shadow of the thorns that ring your head.





IV







Stand-by — 15 Seconds

Oh shit. Hell. Hey, everyone, where's
Alex?

Polly, have you —
Ondine, did you —
Graeme, could you —
Alex!

— trousers, where's my
Shirt, I've lost my
Props, who stole my —
Alex!

Ouch	Bugger
Shush	Quiet
Houselights	Curtain
ALEX!!	





Writers and Readers

Still, pooled, anchored in their chairs
the audience, all ears

Writer floats above them, magnified,
suspended in applause

A questioner, unruly: a sudden breeze
to sway the nodding heads



Writer is affronted, audience
a shoal of disapproval

Overwhelmed, the questioner
is cast into the depths

and the air grows still again.
Writers and readers: and which

is Narcissus,
and which the mirrored pool?





Dante and Isaac Asimov

Dante and Isaac Asimov
agree to divide up the world.
“You can have the facts, Isaac,”
says Dante, waving his bagel,
“and the fiction. Just leave me the poem, OK?”

Isaac thinks about that. He’s
unsure of this underfed stranger.
“The poem?” “*Inferno* and so forth. It’s
all the fame I need.” “That’s fair,” says Isaac.

Dante spreads his hands and smiles.
“Write all you like, my friend.
They’ll still remember me
when you are long forgotten.
Don’t you agree?”

Isaac shrugs. “You’re too
concerned about such things.
Ten books a year and I’m happy—
it doesn’t matter much what on.”

He sees that his plate is clean,
shoves back his chair. “Excuse me, please.
My typewriter calls. Perhaps
we’ll meet again?”
“Perhaps. Enjoy your work, my friend.”



Isaac is swallowed by the wind.
The poet lingers, looking at faces
swirling by his window.
“Always hurrying,” he says.





Angela Carter

Back cover portrait, The Passion of New Eve

And then your portrait on the back
so neutral and complete
standing full-length
posed I don't remember where.
Eyes sky black
you stood unsmiling
suggesting there were realer worlds within.

Your books dealt much in mirrors
which might have led me to suppose
that you were one yourself
and I'd step through the flimsy sheet
that held you to your words
and turn and, face inside your face,
watch the empty space where I had been.





One of the Thieves

One of the thieves was saved.
One faded slowly away, free (half-free)
to wander stone gardens
bare orchards of bone.

It was quiet without the crowds. The sky
cleared after rain. The thief
sat by a pool, drinking.
Night dropped to lap at his feet.

By morning he was shadow. Two children
saw him tugging at the fabric of the day.
“Who’s there?” they asked, but in that asking
he had gone.





Pastoral

Birds in the trees
fish in the river.
In the forest, silence;
foam and smoke over rapids.

Quiet in the lowlands.
In Elysian fields
shadows of evening
the last weary feet heading home.

Voices in darkness
shapes on the hillside:
the lion, the lamb
kissing long slow and hard.





Revenant

When they pulled me from the water
I had scarcely finished breathing
My fingernails dripped blood and sand
My slack-jawed face had turned the blue of ocean

They pushed and pulled my heart to action

I stumbled from the cooling sand
and ate the proffered wafer
All along my neck and arms
the hair stood up in terror

I knew you would see nothing

My eyes still blink
my lips still speak my
feet still strike the pavement
We laugh and smile
and in your speech I
hear the kelp pods cracking

But in the moonless dark of night
avoid the outer windows
I walk beneath the summer rain
and see the green mouth closing
In my wake the crusted salt
dissolves upon the grass blades



Tailback

Don't tell me the road to Hell is closed.
I've been driving for years
dragging this rotting cargo behind me
hands cold as midwinter
skin stained sodium yellow.

I've driven past the edge of sleep.
Fragments of sound from the radio
headlights across the median strip
have been the only sutures
binding my body and mind.

They turned from me at truckstops
sensing that I'd come further and was
further from home than they.
I carried my coffee to deserted tables
ate and drank in silence and moved on.

And I've had burst tires, and the
cooling system's failed, and who living
could I call to make repairs? When this
load of flesh turned running red I
did the job myself. Hence my hands.





Yet I've kept going, no matter who
or what proposed delays, required
to deliver my load to be rendered
collect my meagre, bloodied pay
then crawl to my black-roofed bed.

So you, you with your lights flashing
metallic blue and red
your hooded eyes
and your fangs
don't tell me the road to Hell is closed.





Stone Baby

There now, baby, up we come
Come up and let me
rearrange your limbs

again. I'll put you to my breast
my shoulder
in your swaddling cloth of blue

Dear baby, now it's time for bed
Don't fret, your toys will
gather round your perfect head

and lull you with their
song that never changes
from sun to moon to sun.

Lie still, baby. All is well.
Outside, the atmosphere
is frozen to the ground

and when we sleep, we'll sleep
like kings, not waking till
our stone is flesh again.





That's Far Enough

*Unexplained force acts to slow Pioneer and other
deep-space probes [news]*

Like rotifers in a puddle
staring at the sky
we can look but not touch

It's gentle at first
that force
but insistent

stay within the solar system
and no harm will come to you
you will be allowed the illusion of freedom

but stray too far
and we will have to take steps

nothing unpleasant, you understand
but the subtle application of a force
additional to gravity

gentle at first
but insistent
that force





till you slow,
stop, and return
to whence you came

bearing news:
the Universe is not for you
some things are sacred





HEADWORX

Series Editor: Mark Pirie

New Poetry

Nothing to Declare Harry Ricketts
Salamanca Vivienne Plumb
Sweet Banana Wax Peppers Jenny Powell-Chalmers
The Century Tony Beyer
Pingandy Harvey McQueen
Unmanned Stephen Oliver
Earth Colours L E Scott
Talking Pictures Riemke Ensing
Hats Jenny Powell-Chalmers
Rhyme Before Reason Scott Kendrick
abstract internal furniture Helen Rickerby
Night of Warehouses Stephen Oliver
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