



***Men Briefly Explained* by Tim Jones. Carindale, Qld: Interactive Publications, Pty Ltd (2011). RRP: NZ\$27.99. Pb, 72pp. ISBN: 9781921869327. Reviewed by Mary Cresswell.**

***Men Briefly Explained*** is a splendid title – comprehensive, reassuring,

the book you need to take on a journey of exploration into the jungle – into darkest wherever – or, as here, on a ship heading out to the end of the known world:

Curved over islands, the world  
dragged me south in a talkative year  
slipping Southampton  
as the band played a distant farewell.  
(“Impertinent to sailors”)

The collection is a pilgrim’s progress. “Men at sea” move through “Three southern prose poems”: You travel up to the saddle, your self-image puffing up around you. It shrinks to nothing when you hit the other side; and then “Down George Street in the rain” where you can only ask “Now what?”

A good question  
here in the living room  
at quarter to three.

“Tell yourself you belong,” you say: and you do belong, as far as careful observation and imitation (“Queens of silk, kings of velour”) can help you. Love happens. Before you quite know what’s going on, you are admitting:

You covered me in stolen light –  
this new and secret skin.  
(“Honey moon”)

Shortly afterwards, you are protecting your child from the dreaded but offhand labyrinth tank monsters (“Taking my son to St John’s Pool”).

In the second section, there are no ships any more, only cars, and the pilgrim starts getting philosophical: “As you know, Bob, our numbers are dwindling.

Genetic factors are to blame: our Y chromosomes, fragile to begin with, have proved uniquely vulnerable to the combination of pollution, rich food and grain alcohol. ... Let us, Bob, walk hand in hand to the river.” (“As you know, Bob”).

But I think we have to let the poor old Y chromosomes off the hook, here at least: I am reading the book as a progress towards explaining people, not as advice in the war between the sexes. We’re all in the same boat, and some of Jones’s best lyrics show this. Look at this:

Stone to her water  
his edges eroded slowly  
leaving the core in place.  
He was immovable  
from desk, chair,  
or opinion,  
(“Years with a husband”)

and this:

Odysseus learns to dodge or hide.  
All he wants is a quiet life,  
a place to write his memoirs,  
but she keeps inventing tasks for him.  
“I’m not bloody Hercules,” he says, and,  
“Didn’t I tell you there could be delays?”  
(“And not to yield”)

Now: switch the personal pronouns (and change names). Read the quotes again, out loud. Do the same for the sad and lovely poem “Coverage”. These poems are for everyone – they aren’t men-only. No pilgrim’s progress is easy; we have all thought wistfully of Nussbaum Riegel, boys and girls alike (if not always together).

The pilgrimage ends overlooking the sea:

He settled  
where the sea made a distant mirror  
glimpsed from the sloping decks  
of fast-subsiding houses...  
looking for a sailing time,  
a vessel heading home.  
(“Harbours”)

A fine book from a talented man of words.

Ordering information:  
<http://timjonesbooks.blogspot.com/p/men-briefly-explained.html>