



Graham was born in the UK, but moved to Australia with his family when very young. He has been writing from an early age: since taking up poetry in his 30s, has had several hundred pieces published in Australia and around the world. His first collection, *Shooting Stars*, was published by Ginninderra Press in 2001. A chap-book entitled *The Hieronymus Bosch Shopping Mall* was published by Picaro Press in late 2007, while the same publisher will feature Graham's work in an upcoming *Wagtail* volume.

*'Travelling alone can be a time of soul searching, of observing ourselves and others from new perspectives - and one doesn't always like what one finds. One can end up **Travelling Backwards - Lost in New Zealand**, as Graham Catt did. Catt's brutal honesty, his blade-sharp irony and his ability to capture vivid scenes and moods make this book a unique poetic travelogue: a string of cynical post-cards.'*

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une production de nauvés
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Travelling Backwards

Lost in New Zealand



poems by
Graham Catt

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National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication Entry
Catt, Graham, 1963 -

Travelling Backwards: Lost in New Zealand

ISBN 9780646507811 (pbk.)

A821.4

© **Graham Catt 2009**

Published by *une production de nausées*

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All photographs by Graham Catt

Design and layout by Graham Catt

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Jude Aquilina for editing this manuscript, and for her ongoing support and encouragement.

Thanks also to Amelia Walker, K*m Mann, David Adès, David Mortimer, Jules Leigh Koch, Jill Gower, Stan Sim, Deb Matthews-Zott, Sonja Dechian, Bel Schenk, Cameron Fuller, Belinda Broughton, Louise Nicholas, Kate-Deller Evans, Steve Evans and especially Luke Debuell for their continued inspiration and friendship.

Special thanks to Adrian Robinson for his contributions to *Rules for Tourists*, and to Charles Dickens for *Oliver Twist*, which helped keep me sane during the most difficult moments.

And, as always, all my love to Emily and Lucy.



Anywhere, New Zealand

In early 2007, Graham Catt initiated a grand six-month tour which would take him island-hopping across the South Pacific, via New Zealand, Tahiti and Easter Island, ending up in Chile and finally Peru, where he would climb the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu. He departed for Auckland in early April, totally unprepared in every way.

His trip lasted barely two weeks.

This small collection chronicles his tragicomic 'adventures' while lost in New Zealand.

to my parents

The things I did not see

Adelaide, April 2007

I did not see the hot springs of Rotorua
the Mordor desolation of Tongariro
the Waitomo Caves, rivers of Whanganui

I did not see the Marlborough Sounds
the Canterbury Plains or Christchurch
Mount Cook, or the Franz Josef Glacier

I did not get to laze on the beaches of Aitutaki
or Bora Bora, or visit the distant Marquesas Islands
and I did not see the *moai* of Easter Island

I did not visit Neruda's house in Valparaiso
I did not see the Andes or the Amazon
I did not climb the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu

but I saw more of myself that I'd wanted
no tropical islands, mountain lakes, dense jungle
just a landscape in desperate need of renovation

I left Australia with the only thing I wanted to leave behind

that, at least, is the one thing I *did* see

Travelling Backwards

Adelaide, April 2007

the morning after
I return from New Zealand
I awake in an unfamiliar room

my father's golfing trophies line the shelf
along with mother's seashells, crystals
and bookcase filled with thrillers, romances

the idea that just thirty hours ago
I was in another country
seems an unlikely dream

but the evidence is there, my backpack
slumped in the corner like a murder victim
the wound in its belly bleeding dirty laundry

soon I will have to face the family
- parents, daughters, sisters, aunts
attempt to explain the inexplicable

as I lay there, the implications of my decision
start to tangle in my stomach
- no job, no house, no car, no plan

it is well after 9 a.m, I hear voices outside
but have no desire to talk to anyone
I roll over, close my eyes, as if to sleep

yet something tells me I will never sleep again

Man of Inaction

Adelaide, March 2007

I imagined myself an adventurer
climbing mountains, kayaking rapids

even though the longest walk I took each week
was from the house to the car to the office

and my last camping trip, some thirty years prior
found me weeping when rain seeped into our tent

I enrolled in a kayaking course, then realised I hadn't entered
a pool, a river - any body of water - for fifteen years

didn't even know if I could remember how to swim

still, I joined the group as they ploughed against the wind
along the mansion-lined waters of West Lakes

we learned about the yaw, the ferry, the roll
which I managed, but with no degree of confidence

the course culminated in deliberately overturning our kayaks
swimming fifty-metres back to shore, fully-clothed with kayak and oar

I don't know how I did it, but it took the rest of the weekend to recover
and I received a certificate to prove I didn't die in the attempt

- in New Zealand, the idea of kayaking did not cross my mind

Backpacking for Beginners

Auckland, April 2007

I arrive late
in an unfamiliar city
- already darkened
by the creep of evening

my hostel room is prison-bleak
- a desk, a chair, a bed
the smell of old socks, dead air
the carpet is thirty-years thin

on a shoestring budget
I search for food
consider two-star restaurants
fried chicken, the ubiquitous burger

settle on a cold pasty and coke
from a twenty-four hour servo
the attendant is surly, face like a red brick
he slaps my change on the counter

back at the hostel
I huddle under musty sheets
listen to street sounds
muffled music, the murmur of traffic

the brochures describe
a vibrant nightlife, a city of excitement
I read them again and again
- fall asleep to a lullaby of sirens

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Fight or Flight

Auckland, April 2007

on my fourth night without sleep
kept awake by endless partying
drunken arguments at 3 a.m.
or anxiety over plans for the next day

I begin to wonder what a holiday should be
I imagine relaxation, exhilaration, adventure
and realise I have experienced nothing but fear
- a holiday should not be an exercise in masochism

I'm meant to travel to Rotorua tomorrow, a eight-hour drive
but feel like going home, such is my state of mind
at 4 a.m. while contemplating a hole someone has kicked
in the bathroom door, I formulate a coward's plan

rather than drive to Rotorua or Waitomo or Whakatane
I will fly home to Adelaide – on the first available flight
I drive to Auckland non-stop, my sleeplessness
makes me nervous, on edge, a recipe for disaster

but I find a hotel, book flights, make apologetic phone calls
at 3 a.m. the next day I'm in a taxi on the way to Auckland Airport
during which I have the longest conversation of my trip
an African man – formerly a pilot in Kenya – now driving a taxi

he tells me of the difficulty of moving countries, cultures
the worries he holds for his children, one an angry teenager
the other, a daughter, only eight, who wants to be an architect
I admire the man's courage; feel shame over my decision to flee

as he helps me from the taxi with my luggage
I offer him all the useless New Zealand coins in my wallet
ask he pass them onto the daughter who fills him with such pride
he refuses, but I insist, and he accepts with the biggest smile I've ever seen

I turn towards the terminal, ready to face the consequences of my decision

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The Afterlife

Auckland, April 2007

I said goodbye to family and friends
my house, my car, my belongings
I said goodbye to the family cat

it was a kind of dying, a moving on

like the kings of old, I took a few treasures
a favorite book, watch, camera, iPod
the rest of my former life was left behind

as I'd anticipated, there were no angelic guides
no demons or gods, just more of the same
- bad food, bad driving, bad manners

communicating with loved ones was difficult
there were delays, interruptions, misunderstandings
- few advancements since the Ouija Board

there were small differences in 'the afterlife'
strange currencies, strange accents
but there was plenty of time to catch up on reading

I felt the need to be exceedingly polite
and even the smallest kindness shown to me
- a smile, an apology, an opened door
made me feel warm and grateful inside

there was no television in 'the afterlife'
few animals – just sparrows and gulls
and I missed people I never thought I would

in the end, I returned to my former life
found that everything had moved on without me
- it took months before I stopped feeling like a ghost



K Road, Auckland

The View

Auckland, April 2007

at the hostel
no-one is over twenty-five

at the backpacker's barbecue
I have little to offer on the subjects
of drinking games or extreme sports

on the harbour cruise
no-one is under fifty-five

my attempts at conversation
are greeted with patient grins or nods
as though I'm simple-minded, or speak another language

I seem to inhabit some parallel dimension
- invisible, beyond the possibility of contact

my only friends are shopkeepers
waiters, service station attendants
I walk alone, I eat alone, I sleep alone

from the Sky Tower, I see a sparkling city
a harbour filled with boats, islands - rippling with waves of light

people around me gasp, take photos, smile at the camera
but I am unmoved, beauty seems meaningless
- just shape and colour and tone

the view I see cannot be captured on film



Cape Reinga

The Long Journey

Bay of Islands, April 2007

my room is opposite the spa
where twenty-somethings sip cocktails
trade travel tips and sex stories

they watch me unpack (I imagine a giggle)
a bearded, balding middle-aged man
was he lost? a sex maniac? a lunatic?

the following morning I wait in the drizzle
the kids have surfboards, snorkels and flippers
I have my camera, notebook, novel – a bewildered look

the backpacker buses pull up – all brightly coloured
with names like Awesome Adventures, Mad Dog Tours
my bus looks lost in this laneway of backpacker hostels

I sit behind two grey-haired retirees who ignore me all day
across from a Japanese couple who can only nod and smile
I consider the eight hours ahead, the vista-obliterating rain at the window

on that long journey to Cape Reinga, I read twenty-two chapters of 'Oliver Twist'

Ghost Friday

Auckland, Easter 2007

I was awake at five o'clock, on the streets by seven
imagined the quiet, a result of my early rising

but it stayed that way all day – streets vacant, shops shut
nothing moved on K Road but an old man inspecting bins

I circled the city in an empty bus, equipped with my crumpled map
a hungry stomach, and a headache the size of Mount Wellington

I rambled for hours down roads described in guidebooks as
'pure shopping pleasure - charming, unique, historic and chic'

found nothing open but one shabby coffee shop
which served overcooked food to a 70s soundtrack

almost by accident, I discovered the Auckland Museum
a mock-Parthenon amid a sea of the greenest green

I entered blindly, wandered aimlessly from room to room
soon captivated by Maori treasures, skeletons of giant moas

but the greatest pleasure came in the cafeteria:
a hot, sweet cup of tea overlooking a calm harbour

at the next table, I notice a confused young woman
a crumpled map in one hand, headache pills in the other

The Advantages of Renting a Car

Auckland, Easter 2007

1.

only an hour west of Auckland
a wilderness of forests and wind-beaten beaches
the black sands of Piha and KareKare

I lose myself on steep, twisting roads
attempt a cliffside walk that almost kills me
(a sympathetic sparrow, the only witness)

then the puzzle of excessive exclamation marks:
Trucks Crossing! Workers Ahead! Slow Down! Gas!
at every bend I prepare for constant astonishment

2.

east of Auckland, the fashionable Mission Bay
and south to St Johns and the peak of Mount Wellington
from where even the strip malls of Panmure looked appealing

then Howick and the Pohutukawa Coast, where I ate lunch
overlooking the thundercloud shapes of the Coromandel Peninsula
before passing through town after town closed for business

I stopped at the Castle Café for coffee, expecting medieval hospitality
but no knights or damsels here, just angry youths serving bad attitude
the road home filled with holiday traffic, a convoy of SUVs and camper-vans

I arrive at the hostel safely, park in the street, exhausted but alive
later I receive my souvenirs of the day's adventures
a parking ticket for twenty dollars, and a dent in the fender

The Inhospitability Trade

Bay of Islands, April 2007

I spent thirty minutes
in Pahia post office
trying to send tourist junk to my daughters

but every time I reached the counter
I was told I'd done something wrong:
wrong form, wrong envelope, wrong form

and I was sent to the back of the queue
the clerk's proud Maori face impassive
to my pleas for understanding, common-sense

after the fourth visit to the same woman
who still found something wrong with my paperwork
I lost my temper, raised my coarse Australian voice

she threatened to call the manager, call the police
the souvenirs would have cost less than ten bucks
I threw them in the bin and walked out – nothing was worth such fuss

Rules for Tourists

Bay of Islands, April 2007

take photos of everything

if the tour bus stops for a break, buy something – anything

buy t-shirts and hats from the places you visit – and wear them

always try to bargain the price down, even when already paying next to nothing

feel entitled to complain about anything – loudly

expect everyone to speak English

if they don't speak English – just speak louder and slower

visit somewhere for 10 minutes, then become an expert on the place

talk loudly in inappropriate places (e.g. churches, mosques, sacred sites)

feel entitled to tell the locals how things are so much better at home

eat fast food, even when delicious local food is readily available

if you are Australian, and meet other Aussies, sing 'Khe Sahn' on the tour bus

if you are young, drink massive amounts of alcohol – vomit unashamedly

avoid talking to single travelers, unless they are attractive females

especially avoid balding, middle-aged men travelling on their own

criticise 'tourists' – you're a traveler, not a 'tourist'

On the Slopes of Rangitoto

Auckland, Easter 2007

I came prepared:

hiking boots, sunscreen, hat

- rugged rust-red beard

but just a third of the way

up Rangitoto's steep slope

ran out of breath, saw spots before my eyes

and slumped on a picnic bench

decided that the only way for me was down

- on the way I passed the rest of humanity:

an elderly couple with walking sticks

tiny children, a Japanese grandmother

- coffee cup in one hand, cigarette in the other

a score of sunburnt Scandinavians

a fat man carrying a pram, while his wife

carried the baby, held another child by the hand

and as they passed, they smiled at me, and I smiled at them

but how I envied the ease of their walk

how I hated their enthusiasm

and alone at the dock

I hid in the pages of a novel

hid in the shame of my failure

while far above me, on the rim of Rangitoto

children looked out on Auckland harbour

with a view of the world I could only imagine

The Bay of Storms

Bay of Islands, April 2007

the drive north was easy enough
a stop for breakfast at Dairy Flat
and morning tea at Kawakawa
where the biggest attraction is a public toilet

I join the Bay of Islands cruise
along with scores of Germans and Japanese
my attempts at conversation are futile
so I take photos like everyone else

I photograph the same dolphins, the same rocks
the stale commentary drowned out by camera clicks
I try to take a photo of a beautiful, blonde Swedish girl
until her boyfriend catches me, and I pretend I'm shooting at clouds

at the Waitangi Treaty Grounds I am the only one on tour
but the young Maori guide addresses me as though I'm a crowd
I keep looking around at the people he talks to, but they are invisible
I ask perfunctory questions, he provides perfunctory answers

for dinner I decide to drive to Russell
five minutes across the harbour, but a thirty minute drive
through winding hills, and a ferry ride across the channel
I'm just finishing dinner when I notice a wall of cloud heading our way

within minutes the harbour is rendered invisible by torrential rain
and the drive back to Pahia is pure terror – no vision, dangerous roads
the ferry is still running, but tosses back and forth like a bath toy
if I thought there was a god, I might have even prayed

I am surprisingly relieved to get back to the hostel
where a grinning backpacking poster-boy overlooks my bed
as the storm rages around the bay, and rain drowns out my music
I immerse myself in 'Oliver Twist', imagine I am somewhere else

Dead Beard

Bay of Islands, April 2007

I'm sure I saw it on a list of backpacking essentials:
map, compass, pocket knife, first aid kit, beard

and over the months prior to leaving, cultivated
something strange and red and grey and ugly

people agreed it aged me ten years at least

I wore it awkwardly, an accessory that never quite fit
and it gained me no friends or sympathy on the trip

after the humiliation of my attempt on Rangitoto
my sorry cliffside walk, and failure to converse with strangers

I decided I didn't deserve a beard, stripped myself of the false honour

when I reached the Bay of Islands the first thing I did was shave
each sliver of hair fell like a flake of shame into the basin

I walked out into the world a changed person – no-one noticed