Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The Horseman

Written by Tim Pears

Published by Bloomsbury

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

'With hypnotic lyricism, Pears describes this bucolic Devon world and the people who inhabit it'
Mail on Sunday

TIM PEARS

THE HORSEMAN

'A novel that is as moving and profound as it is evocative of the landscape and period … Luminous'
Observer



THE WEST COUNTRY TRILOGY

BLOOMSBURY

THE HORSEMAN

Tim Pears

BLOOMSBURY
LONDON • OXFORD • NEW YORK • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

Bloomsbury Paperbacks
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP
UK

1385 Broadway
New York
NY 10018
USA

www.bloomsbury.com

BLOOMSBURY and the Diana logo are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in Great Britain 2017
This paperback edition first published in 2017

© Tim Pears, 2017

Tim Pears has asserted his right under the Copyright,
Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work.

This is a work of fiction. Names and characters are the product of the
author's imagination and any resemblance to actual persons,
living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or
transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical,
including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or
retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

No responsibility for loss caused to any individual or organization
acting on or refraining from action as a result of the material in
this publication can be accepted by Bloomsbury or the author.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN:	HB:	978-1-4088-7687-9
	TPB:	978-1-4088-7688-6
	PB:	978-1-4088-7684-8
	EPUB:	978-1-4088-7689-3

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typeset by Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd.
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com.
Here you will find extracts, author interviews, details of forthcoming
events and the option to sign up for our newsletters.

For Craig and Ineke

I saw in the night, and behold, a man riding upon a red horse! He was standing among the myrtle trees in the glen; and behind him were red, sorrel, and white horses. Then I said, 'What are these, my lord?' The angel who talked with me said to me, 'I will show you what they are.' So the man who was standing among the myrtle trees answered, 'These are they whom the Lord has sent to patrol the earth.'

Zechariah, 1:8-10

Prologue

The boy, Leopold Jonas Sercombe, stood by his father at the open doorway to the smithy. Jacob Crocker's younger son, the gangly one, fed a circle of metal into the furnace. Outside, behind the boy, the earth was frozen. His feet were numb and his arse throbbed with the cold but he could feel the heat on his face. His father's gaze was rapt and hawkish, he'd come to scrutinise, for these wheels were for the great waggon and he'd let naught shoddy by. Merely by his presence he gave Jacob Crocker to know that if Albert Sercombe found fault, nothing would please him more than to reject the lot for the master.

The stocks had been shaped from oak logs and rested in the seasoning chamber five years. The wheels and their parts were carved from oak and stored another three. The dates were nicked into the wood by the wheelwright next-door. Jacob Crocker laid a wooden wheel down on the tyring platform.

The boy had been here many times with the horses. In the corner sat the old fellow as he always sat, astride a childish stool, sharpening the horseshoe nails a Crocker son had cut from an iron rod; hunched over an ancient anvil this gatfer sat beneath a window festooned

with cobwebs, and put a point on the nails with a small hammer. Did the old man ever move from that spot, night or day, or was he welded to it? Perhaps he had been there for ever, tapping at the nails since the first horses were shod a thousand years ago, crouching with his little hammer like a hobgoblin smith at the oldest forge in the known world.

Jacob Crocker was wet with sweat. His younger son now worked the bellows. Standing in the doorway the boy could feel the temperature rise. When the smith moved, the boy could see the ground damp where sweat had run out of the soles of his boots. A white fowl pranced slowly amongst the litter of rusty iron on the coal-dusty ground, inspecting the clinker as if for tasty morsels. Horseshoes hung on nails spaced along the roof joists according to their size. The boy's backside tingled. His nostrils itched.

The smith's elder son, the one with the livid scar across his cheek that drew your eyes to it, reached in his pliers and drew the iron tyre out of the furnace, white hot. Crocker pincered it on the other side. The blacksmiths had made it three inches too small but in the heat of the fire it expanded. They eased it down onto the rim of the wooden wheel. As it seared the wood the great wheel burst into flame.

The wheel was on fire but the smiths ignored the blaze, calmly knocked the iron tyre into place, tapping it with their hammers here, and here. Each became satisfied that the fit was snug at the same unspoken moment and took a step back off the platform. Crocker signalled with a minute inclination of his head to his second son,

who pressed a lever. The platform dropped, the wheel was plunged into a trough of water.

Fierce plumes of steam rose hissing and bubbling from the tempering trough. And now there came a loud knocking and cracking from under the water, as the metal tyre contracted and squeezed the component parts of the wheel impossibly tight together, driving the spokes into position. The men stood. The boy listened slack-mouthed to the sounds like those of a ghost rapping out a message for him.

The banging muted and gradually ceased, as the blacksmiths stood by, and the boy's father peered, till the water was still and the forge was silent, the first of four wooden wheels stifled into submission.

January 1911

The boy walked through the cold darkness behind his father and older brother Fred. None spoke but at the farm Fred went to the other stable. Albert lit hurricane lanterns. The boy heard his cousin Herbert's footsteps as he came running towards them. Herbert appeared out of the dark and went directly to the feed room. Into the barrow he shovelled chaff and oat flour. The boy assisted him, pitching mangolds into the pulping machine whose handle Herbert turned. When it was done he added the pulp to the chaff. The boy mixed it up as best he could with a fork then Herbert wheeled the barrow to the stable and went from one stall to the next, shovelling the horses' breakfast into their feeding troughs.

The boy's father Albert came into the stable with a dense wodge of hay balanced on his head. He climbed the ladder into the tallet loft. From there the carter pitched summer-scented hay into the mangers, whistling through his teeth to his horses below. With their lips they pulled wisps and strands of the fodder through the wooden racks.

'Seein as you is here, boy, you can give em some corn. Give Noble double.'

The boy opened the metal bin. The clanking of the lid caused each of the horses to turn towards the sound. The biggest carthorse, Red, was nearest. In the cold stall he exhaled and his breath poured in two plumes from his nostrils. The boy scooped the corn.

They walked back to the cottage. The boy's mother Ruth gave them bread and boiled bacon. They ate in silence, the numb parts of their bodies tingling back to painful feeling. Ruth adjusted the wick of the paraffin lamp upon the table as light seeped into the room. This table upon which the doctor had removed Fred's tonsils some years back. The boy searched for the bloodstain. Perhaps it was no longer there.

Albert drained his mug of tea. 'They ploughs won't lead theirselves,' he said, and stood up. Fred stood too. They took up their croust bags that Ruth had placed upon the table, and left. The boy Leo followed. His mother did not try to stop him but said that his sister Kizzie would bring his lunch to school and that he'd best not be late again or he'd feel the switch from Miss Pugsley, and his mother would not object.

In the tack room the boy watched his father gather implements. A heavy plough spanner. Whip cord. Thongs of leather to repair harness. Shut links to mend the plough traces. He placed these in a canvas basket. Horse nail stubs to fix spreaders, cart nails for cleats to hold the plough wheels for a time.

Herbert geared up two of the horses, Red and one of the two-year-old black geldings, Coal, as requested by his carter.

Albert applied grease to the mould board of the plough, and they set off as light seeped into the world around them.

'Give you a leg up,' Albert told his son. The boy sat side-wise atop Red, the nearside horse. Albert walked next to him. He carried a plough paddle, using it as a walking stick though none was needed. His corduroy trousers were tied with string below the knee. Herbert chose not to follow this fashion. The carter's and his lad's croust bags hung from Red's hames.

'Not a bleedin cloud above us,' Herbert called from behind. 'Clean and raw today.'

They reached Higher Redlands, a pasture to be ploughed for corn. The boy rolled onto his stomach and slid off the carthorse. Herbert hung their bags from the branch of an elm tree by the gate. Albert set the plough. When Herbert was ready Albert handed him the paddle. 'Aim for that ash tree in yon hedge,' he said. 'Red's steady but if Coal lags, crack the whip.'

'Yes, gaffer, I knows that.'

'Don't touch him, mind, just crack it by his ears.'

Albert turned and walked back through the gateway. Herbert shook his head, then he clicked his tongue and called to the horses to move. The coulter bit into the turf and as the plough moved forward so the turf rose and turned over. The boy walked to the gate and on to school.

*

In the afternoon he walked home the same way. The sun lowered in the sky and some parts of the hillocky land were in shadow, others in harsh light. Four plough teams now worked in four small sloping, ill-shaped fields. His uncle Enoch and brother Fred drove two horses each. Herbert still ploughed Higher Redlands behind Red and Coal. His father Albert had put the other gelding next to Pleasant the old mare. He worked Lower Redlands, the steepest of the fields in that part of Manor Farm. He used a one-way plough, stopping at the end of each furrow to tilt the plough and so engage the alternate mould board. Ploughing one way across the slope of the hill the furrow was turned to the left, the other way to the right, both ways downhill as gravity demanded. The uppermost horse took most of the strain but the gelding did not shirk. The boy's father told him that the old mare was their best exemplar. She had some quality that inclined young horses to copy her. He did not know what it was. The boy watched. He could not see it either but he believed his father, that it existed.

The turf rose up and curled over like a long thin wave breaking on the beach of Bridgwater Bay. This pasture had not been a fruitful one, it was full of stroil grass. The horses' feet thudded, the whippletrees swung, the coulter ripped through speedwell, bindweed, dandelion. In one direction, walking west across the field, the sun was glaring and his father bent his head. He walked with a rolling, sideways carriage, shoulders swaying. A

gait he could no longer rid himself of even when walking unencumbered in the yard or lane.

None noticed the boy watching them for each man and lad aspired to the straightest lines, on which depended his reputation. They would plough one acre in the day, each walking fifteen miles.

The new soil came up dark brown, reddish, for the frost and ice to break it up. Behind his father, as behind each of the other three ploughmen, swirling blizzards of gulls fell swooping to the ground for wireworms and chafer-grubs. They had not been there this morning.

In the field where Herbert ploughed, other birds scavenged and the boy walked through the gate to study them. Wagtails. A chaffinch. Two or three lapwings strutted quickly forwards to peck up insects. He spotted curlews, starlings, golden plovers, stalking the upturned earth, but they were outnumbered by the gulls who bullied them for the worms in their beaks and chased them, screeching with a noise like metal scraped across metal.

Herbert reached the hedge and called to the horses to turn and set back once more in parallel to his previous course. The coulter jumped out of the furrow. The boy could not see if it had hit a stone. Perhaps it had. Herbert called the horses to a halt. He looked down at the ground. He kicked the soil over with his foot. As if surprised by this erratic unexpected behaviour the gulls ceased squawking for a moment. Without the sound of horses' footsteps, jangling harness, the coulter ringing as it cut the ground, there was a sudden quiet. No

such sounds from the next field either where Albert ploughed.

'That won't show,' Herbert said out loud to himself as he toed the furrow straight.

Something, a sound or movement, caused the boy to turn towards the hedge. He saw his father's face through branches, some leafless and others the bright dark green of holly, like some wintry Green Man akin to that carved into the end of one of the choir stalls in the village church; only seen by boys seeking it. A bodiless head in the foliage. His father's expression was blank. What he did there in the hedgerow was a mystery. Then his head shifted and the boy understood his father was buttoning his flies.

Albert walked along the hedge and came through the open gateway into the field. He did not see the boy or if he did he paid no heed. He walked up the furrow behind Herbert, who had resumed his course, and yelled for him to stop. The lad called the horses to whoa and turned. Albert asked him for the whip, and Herbert handed it over. He looked neither anxious nor surprised but merely at a loss. Albert told him to remove his coat.

Herbert frowned. There was in this grimace of fear some kind of sarcasm, almost a smile, as well.

'Take off your jacket, lad,' Albert said.

Slowly, button by button, Herbert undid his jacket and shrugged it off. He hung it over one of the handles of the plough.

'And your waistcoat,' Albert said.

The lad hesitated, then he unbuttoned his waistcoat. His expression became surly, petulant.

'And your shirt.'

Herbert seemed to shake his head though it might have been a shiver. 'Tis fuckin cold, uncle,' he said.

'Take it off.'

Herbert scooped his braces off his shoulders and let them fall to hang by his sides. He pulled the bottom of his shirt out of his trousers. He undid the top buttons of his white sweat- and mud-streaked cotton shirt and, leaning forward, pulled it over his head. Then he hung it with the waistcoat on the other handle of the plough.

He stood looking at his carter, waiting. His scrawny torso was white and bare save for a scribble of hair midway between his brown nipples.

Albert gazed at his lad. Then he took two steps forward, at a diagonal away from Herbert, as if to march off across the field. But then as he came level with the lad he raised the whip and turned and cracked it hard upon his back. Herbert squealed and turned away but Albert pursued him, following round after him and striking him once more across the back.

Herbert cursed and cried out in pain. Albert laid the whip carefully across the handles of the plough.

'That won't show neither,' he said. 'Now put your garments on and plough the furrow.'

The boy watched his father walk back into his own field. He watched Herbert pulling on his clothes in a desultory manner, sniffing to himself. A glimpse of red weal already on the white skin. Herbert buttoned up the waistcoat with trembling fingers. He looked up and saw Leo watching him. It seemed he would say something

but he did not. He put on his coat and turned to the plough. He picked up the whip and cracked it close to Coal's rump and told the horses to go on.

The boy heard a sudden tumultuous cacophony of birds bickering and squawking, and understood that they had made this noise all the while, but he had not heard nor seen them even though now they filled the air. He turned and walked homeward.