

## The Roads

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## Books by David Kennedy

### Books of Poetry

*The Elephant's Typewriter* (1996)

*Men's Talk* (1998)

*Cities* (1998)

*Four True Prophecies of the New State* (1999)

*The Fiery Chariot* (2000)

*Max Jacob: The Dice Cup Part I* (translation with Christopher Pilling, 2000)

*Cornell: A Circuition Around His Circumambulation* (2001)

*The President of Earth: New and Selected Poems* (2002)

*Eight Excursions* (collaboration with Rupert Loydell, 2003)

### Books About Poetry

*New Relations: The Refashioning of British Poetry 1980–1994* (1996)

### As Editor

*The New Poetry* with Michael Hulse and David Morley (1993)

*Additional Apparitions: Poetry, Performance & Site Specificity* with Keith Tuma (2002)

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*To Betty, Christine and Marion*



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# The Roads



## The Enchanted Lake

Beautiful young violinists of the student orchestra,  
how you make me lick my lips  
as I am carried over the audience  
on the crest of your unsalted concentration!  
You take me to the end of the concert  
and let me watch you singing your violins to sleep  
in their little coffins.  
You let me see that sometimes the velvet is red  
and sometimes the velvet is blue.  
You take me high above the city  
to the end of the night  
and show me bachelors, young and old,  
in their crusty flats, nodding  
over their catalogues of dead flies and stiff socks  
as they dream of savouring  
long warm draughts of your bathwater.  
We leave them to watch the spiders  
in the first, empty light of dawn  
getting their webs ready for the day's business.  
At last, you take me to the beginning of music.  
I am so small I could be swaddled in one page of the score.  
My mother's face is very big.  
She lifts me on to her shoulder  
and, moving her hand back and forth,  
back and forth over my tiny spine,  
sings a song about an enchanted lake.

## Red Horse

In the town by the wide river  
all the lovers are asleep.  
Their dreams rise up chimneys  
and emerge, distending slowly  
like inverted drops of water,  
then expanding to their full size  
and falling upwards.  
Up, up they float until the earth  
begins to curve beneath them;  
up, up where the moon hangs off a rack  
at the top of night's big shed  
watching the small hours fossick  
and scurry furtively between deep blue shadows  
on the banks of the wide river.  
What big dreams some people have,  
the moon thinks, and what strange ones!  
What is a unicorn doing  
with all that flat pack furniture?  
And whose granny is that  
going into a wardrobe with Stalin  
and coming out again with a bag of mushrooms?  
The dream that pops out  
of our chimney is about a red horse.  
Red horse, where are you taking us, red horse,  
on your back as wide as the wide river?  
The stars tinkle in his bridle  
as he tosses his head and neighs a giant horsey laugh.  
His teeth are lighted windows in the night.  
He carries us, sleeping, on his back until morning.

## Poem with Hand and Small Fish

This is the poem that begins by understanding love.  
Just like that? Yes, just 'like that'. Look: a hand resting in  
marbling green waters with little fish playing through  
its fingers, giving it otherwise unavailable micro-services,

things it never knew it wanted until it got them  
—just like this year and its new saloons or the world  
and the Mona Lisa. Upstairs in the lodging house,  
there is rhythmic banging from one of the attic rooms

as, tears streaming down his face, the old man works  
with mallets  
an elephant's typewriter which prints 'Fifi'  
and the word 'idiot' for the trainer's name.  
Later, he will serenade his life with 'The Isle of Capri'

played on a brass sousaphone. Old Mrs. Czerkas,  
the landlady, is deaf to all complaints because she, too,  
understands love as this poem does as it ends with a donkey  
—practical, sad, surreal, susceptible to rescue.

## The Roads

*for John Hartley Williams*

The roads yearn  
in the sunlight  
before sloping off  
into the forest  
and their verges hum  
with flowers  
like young brides  
on wedding mornings.

Under the trees  
where the low walls  
of dead fields  
dodder and totter  
into moss and brambles  
a bridle jingles once:  
a black mare waits  
and an open carriage.

Your own desires  
whisper in the leaves,  
in the long grasses  
pulling your foot to the step.  
As you sit, a blanket  
flows up over your legs  
like Granny tucking you in  
after a bad dream.

Deep into the forest  
trots the mare.  
You do not hear dead branches  
snapping at the spokes  
of the wheels.  
You do not see the light  
grow thin and frigid  
— you are dreaming

of the roads, the roads.  
The crests of gentle cambers  
or thick, buttery mud  
— it's all the same  
to your young man's boots!  
But all your dreaming  
returns to the same scene:  
your mother and your sisters

spilling from the doorway  
of the cottage, begging  
you to stay at home  
with the cows and chickens.  
When you next awake  
the trees are the thin stalks  
of green iron lampposts  
with creeper picked out in gold

and four branches  
holding lamps like teardrops.  
The roads are lined  
with pavement cafés  
whose gorgeous waitresses  
speak inside your head.  
To everything they say  
you answer 'yes'.

After rich cake  
and jugs of sweet wine  
that fills your veins  
like syrup distilled  
from sleep  
you need the restroom.  
Pushing open the only door  
at the back you step out

under the trees.  
The gorgeous waitresses  
sit on the grass  
in twos and threes.  
They file each other's perfect teeth  
to points like needles.  
And as they work they sing  
the old song that frightens children:

Young man, young man,  
how long have you been away?  
The village has no sons left.  
Your mother does  
what all mothers do there,  
sits crying in the great circle.  
Your Granny looks at the violets  
from underneath.

Young man, young man,  
how long have you been hanging  
from the rafters of the forest?  
How long has your husk  
whispered there?

## Warsaw Nights

*for Jacek Gutorow & Jerzy Jarniewicz*

The last stroke of midnight clangs  
in the phone. It's the front desk:  
the boat you ordered is waiting.  
You forgot that 'perhaps'  
sounds exactly like 'sea'  
when they asked if you were going out.  
The sails fill slowly like rose petals  
falling through honey  
and the boat slides on butter  
the moon spreads over the empty squares  
and their uninhabited plinths.  
Where are all the poets and heroes?  
Down in the red cellar  
standing you drink after drink.  
Everyone's getting excited  
about poetry and history,  
taking it in turns  
to hold forth like film directors  
addressing their casts.  
You feel you should speak too,  
bring together the remotest things  
on a hairpin bend  
in the conversation or coin a bon mot  
like 'A new century is crackling in the hearth'.  
But what do you know,  
what can you say about history?  
The pork escalope they serve you  
has been bashed into the shape  
of a pig's ear that rings  
with its own dying squeal.