

The Solex Brothers (Redux)

LUKE KENNARD is a poet, critic, dramatist and pugilist. He is compassionate, but prone to anxiety and bleak introspection. Many have called him polite and quite funny, but add that he suffers from a tendency towards constant nervous laughter and an apparently involuntary rictus of disdain. His poetry and criticism have appeared in *Stride Magazine*, *Sentence*, *Echo:Location*, *The Tall Lighthouse Review*, *Reactions 4*, *Orbis*, *14 Magazine*, *The Flying Post*, *Exultations and Difficulties*. He won an Eric Gregory Award in 2005 and was shortlisted for the Forward Prize in 2007. He is quite tall.

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AND OTHER PROSE POEMS

Now with explanatory notes

LUKE KENNARD



CAMBRIDGE

PUBLISHED BY SALT PUBLISHING
PO Box 937, Great Wilbraham, Cambridge CB21 5JX United Kingdom

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First published by Stride Publications 2005
Second edition Salt Publishing 2007

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by Biddles Ltd, Kings Lynn, Norfolk

Typeset in Swift 9,5 / 13

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ISBN 978 1 84471 411 7 hardback

Salt Publishing Ltd gratefully acknowledges
the financial assistance of Arts Council England



1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

For Zoë

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Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Rupert M. Loydell, editor of Stride Books, for his permission to reprint the text of *The Solex Brothers* (Stride Books, 2005) in this new edition. And, more to the point, for publishing it in the first place.

Andy Brown for constant encouragement, inspiration and clear-sighted criticism.

Somerset County Council, in whose offices and on whose scrap paper many of these poems began. The Eric Gregory Foundation and The Society of Authors for an award in 2005.

The Solex Brothers

I

I boarded the train. ‘It’s great, the way you use your feet to play that guitar,’ I said. We were all given water, a gesture some interpreted as political and, on grounds of having no interest in politics, refused to drink. ‘Fools,’ muttered the politician. ‘Politics is in my hair. Politics is seeping out of my pores.’

The train mounted a bridge over the sea. Tiny blue swallows decorated us. I shared a cabin with an undercover policeman and the Solex Brothers, twice the size of ordinary men. The Solex Brothers were broad and salient, their card game a distraction. I had heard about them: ‘They grab you by the head and force your head into places it doesn’t normally go—like into a jug.’

Oh, cruel freewill. Every year I make this journey for reasons *known* but unfathomable, my mouth tight with disdain. Yesterday I overwound my watch and the spring snapped with a cavernous sound. I wish I’d never offered them a cognac, but we are damned to believe a man when he tells us we are kind: the half that doesn’t believe him is relieved.

‘Marbles,’ said the undercover policeman, producing a bag and spilling them onto the floor. In the ensuing chaos, we alighted on our knees.

II

On Platform 4 the Solex Brothers ran this way and that, chasing the shapes of women. They had no luggage, but a Mustang idled to convey them hence. 'Ride with us, why don't you?' they cried.

I fell asleep in the leatherette silence. I dreamt I was a liar. I awoke to see turquoise light rushing between the branches. A sandwich board lay at the road side.

'Give us a song!' cried the Solex Brothers. And to my relief I found they were talking to the chauffeur. A deer sprung over the road.

'Fields of inedible vegetables,' sang the chauffeur, 'midden boys tainting their flocks. Songs anti- and pro- all have dead melodies; for tuppence I'll show you my scar.'

And we all joined in the second time:

*Fields of inedible vegetables,
Midden boys, tainting their flocks,
Songs anti- and pro- all have dead melodies,
For tuppence I'll show you my scar.*

And the chauffeur sang the next verse:

*Shields of gentle Euripides,
Hidden joys wait in your docks,
Throngs come and go, but the static will grow,
For instance, when driving a car.*

'It's a chauffeur song,' he explained. 'You know, for the Little Guy.' The roadside diners glimmered like bookshelves, little glowing bookshelves.

III

The ecstatic chariots in my lungs.

‘These are your quarters, dear boy, above the library. Those are the moors, this is the bread room, overhead the incident hallway—avoid that if possible.’

‘And in that room is young Lucida, a prodigy—whom we have engaged you to teach.’ The other Solex brother laughed. ‘She is beautiful as a summer evening,’ he yelled.

I was to teach Lucida the works of Pushkin.

I attended to ablutions, marvelling that I had been employed in so happy a capacity. Not once had I made this journey and found work that agreed with me as much as lecturing a beautiful young woman on the works of Pushkin.

As I lathered my face and weighed the golden razor in my hand, a bell rang like a crystal and I cut my face several times so as not to be late.

Dressed in my new suit, I took three stairs at a time, scarcely able to contain etc.

But to my horror, Lucida—who I met over dinner—turned out to be a rag doll made of dish-cloths.

IV

There were no words in the library. Sometimes their lectures were just butterflies released into the theatre; the prevalence of butterflies, their silence.

Under the tutelage of the Solex Brothers I learned that in all things, there is a kite—whether caked in silence or snagged on promise.

Their house, lodged in a valley, caught fire frequently due to the thin air.

Each day at twelve we ate national dishes. At dinner, a thin gruel called *skirmish*.

I soon swore off parataxis—its fragments of mistrust.

Behind a locked door they kept an inverted castle, a red ceramic affair, decorated with hysterical curlicues and loops that went on to form part of the structure. A black a hole in its side.

I put my head into the thing and something marvellous happened. It was dark and cold and my headache siphoned off, into the thing, and never troubled me again.

Landscape with Mist and Devils was painted here.

We were visited with no little frequency by its painter, Emily Easterville. Her favourite outfit was a lake in the grounds of the house. She would stand in the middle of the lake, water up to her shoulders, and say, ‘Help me get all these fish out of my dress.’

Underwater the kites flew.

V

What lurid adoption the Solex Brothers practised. A voice, foreign and new in the hall each morning. I lay in bed, afraid until the afternoon. Their cars left at exactly 8:30. I did the washing up in very hot water.

For a month I was happy in their patronage, happy in my solidity and in my arrogance, not to say innocence. I flexed my shoulders; I admired my shoulders in the deep yellow mirrors.

The Solex Brothers lived at some height, but the intricacy of their illustrations began to leave me jealous and dejected. That shameful dressing gown was always hanging somewhere in my mind, keeping me silent.

And I felt less welcome at the table—was always asked to, ‘Go and help Lucida with the washing up. That girl hasn’t stopped talking about you all day.’

So, festooned with cigarettes, I came to resent their sleek dispensations, came to loath their boring, tidal breath. My hands blistered and chafed for them.

I collected bread from the bakery. The Father, on his bicycle, whispered, ‘A friend of mine would like a word with you.’

VI

It was not I who suggested murder—after all, other than employing me as protégé and butler, what was their crime?

But in the apple-strewn antechamber of the half-ruined church I learned that the Solex Brothers had made many enemies among the townsfolk.

‘My vegetables may be inedible,’ said Jack Glass, an arable farmer, ‘but there are seven different varieties and they all have their uses.’

They had upset filing systems and undermined the quartz mine by building another mine underneath it.

‘They killed my father and called it collateral damage,’ said Sophie, a young woman the like of which I had hoped to lecture on Pushkin.

During a brief stint as mayors in 1978, the Solex Brothers had devolved every street in the city until it had its own jurisdiction and parliament. When they retired three years later, the new mayor attempted to reinstate what he saw as common sense, but, due to innumerable insolvencies since devolution, only $\frac{3}{8}$ of the streets wanted to be recentralised. The entire community, if you could call it that, was left in chaos.

But what of all their visitors and friends?

‘Nonsense,’ said the Father. ‘Their visitors are paid actors—each brother takes it in turn to hire.’

As I had access to the meals of the Solex Brothers, it was decided that I should poison the *skirmish* and ring the crystal bell five times to let the city know of their demise.

'A person who does just what he or she has been told to do, and takes no real interest, will certainly not advance quickly,' said Sophie, handing me a leather-bound volume entitled *The Follies of The Solex Brothers, 1958–2002*.

VII

No sooner had I struck the crystal bell for the fifth time with the little wooden harlequin than I realised the poison in the *skirmish* had not slain the Solex Brothers. They sat up in their chairs and wiped the *skirmish* from their faces, blinking.

As fireworks burst over the city I clasped my brow in exasperation.

But my fortune was to turn for, while the poison had not ended the Solex Brothers, it had drained them of any sense forever.

‘Few roads on the island are wide enough,’ said one of the Solex Brothers.

‘There are many brown bears in America,’ said his brother.

‘There are not many clouds now,’ agreed the first Solex brother.

‘I myself do not expect the Company ever to look back again,’ said his brother.

‘The time is come to receive it,’ granted his brother.

‘The wolverine trap will take too long to build,’ his brother complained.

‘She was most attractive in her scarlet bonnet,’ said his brother.
‘We shall be called The Snow People, I think.’

They wrote many poems over the next few days—and I oversaw this work and offered advice, taking pleasure in the cruel reversal. Their best was a three line poem without a title:

*How beautiful the tops of the mountains are,
The red sun above them.
I don't understand anything about it.*

VIII

I left town on the same train under a banner of knowledge. I had asked Sophie to accompany me, but she declined. The Solex Brothers gave a moving, harmless speech.

'I've learned so much from all of you,' I said, my lips pressed to the cold glass.

A man was still playing the guitar with his feet, but this time I didn't comment.

A journey back should always be underwritten.

EPILOGUE

He handed me the telephone. 'It is the Solex Brothers,' he said.

I indicated that I was not to be disturbed, but he wandered into the kitchen, shaking his head.

'If this is about the poison,' I said. But it was not about poison.

'Why does God allow us to suffer?' they asked.

Over the last year the Solex Brothers had come to rely on me for encouragement and edification.

'I don't know,' I said. 'Why does he allow us to feel joy?'

Outside the sea lapped the shore. I was trying this new water-flavour chewing gum.

About gum my grandmother said, 'You can chew that stuff as long as you don't chew it anywhere near me.' She said hundreds of more important things, too.

You lose everyone. Each loss prepares you for a greater loss. She didn't say that. That wasn't really her style.

'Hey,' said the Solex Brothers, noticing the silence, 'hey, are you *chewing* something? And what's with that flatmate of yours, anyway? I don't think he likes us. What are you supposed to do when someone doesn't like you?'

'Kill them,' I said.

The line went dead

To a Wolf

I

When I wrote to the wolf my tie got stuck in the pillar box. I waved my arms and screamed, 'Who! Whooooo!'

In my more fanciful moments I LIKE TO IMAGINE A TINY MAN inside the pillar box and I LIKE TO IMAGINE HIM HOLDING ONTO MY TIE FOR 'DEAR LIFE' as I wave my arms and try to pull myself away from the pillar box which I imagine HE, for whatever reason, WANTS TO PULL MY FACE VERY CLOSE TO, PERHAPS IN ORDER TO SPIT IN IT.

I had to remove my tie to free my body from the pillar box.

Anyway, my letter was lost in the post and it was months before I heard from the wolf. Wounded, he assumed I had neglected him:

Dear Bastard,

Nobody came to see the great show in the arboretum, in spite of free tickets attached to balloons and let loose over the city. Let us take a moment to imagine that:

Nobody.

Balloons!

Yrs,

Wolf

Sometimes I just stand at the top of the tower and I look all over the city and I weep about it. (Although really I am weeping about something else).

II

'You can keep your opinions and your achievements,' avers the wolf. 'Keep also your *raison d'etres* and your holidays. What I like are *representations of myself*.'

The wolf is just crazy for representations of himself.

'Here's a picture of you, wolf.'

'Great!' cries the wolf.

'Here's a story about you.'

'Give it here!' cries the wolf.

The arboretum has grown over with scathing moss. Inside members of staff have been asked to remain calm while the flowers grow over their uniform and pin them to the glass wall. Twenty members of staff, boys and girls, and one enormous uniform—so as they look not unlike a monster with many heads and limbs.

'I was told, come spring, we would all drink lamb's milk,' mutters the concierge. 'But *now* look at us.'

I spend November building a zoetrope that depicts the wolf standing on his hind legs and chasing a hoop.

'That's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen!' the wolf exclaims.

We could all stand to learn something from the wolf.

'Hey!' yelps the wolf, later. 'This novel you wrote about me is rather circumlocutory. Where are all the descriptions of my *white-noise* fur and bloody breath like the steam from a kettle?'

'It isn't finished yet,' I snap.

III

Today was a good day, but it was not the best day. Not a pirate ship or a bottle of invisible ink or a conversation with your friend in Morse Code. No, there is a distinct lick of brass to the air which today is discreetly lacking.

A lovely job in a theatre! An ice rink in the square at night! Why should I be denied these things? (It is because I do not deserve them).

The wolf, staying now for the duration of winter, is capricious: 'I can't stand you any longer!' he hollers. Moments later he's taken me to town to buy me all of Chuck Palahniuk's novels. 'These are really good,' he says. 'You'll love this guy.'

My girlfriend and I agree that the wolf should pursue a career—and there is just the position for him at Whitehall:

WOLF REQUIRED, £20 per hour.

The wolf applies, commutes to his interview and, two days hence, is informed through the mail that, even in the face of gross competition, he has been given the post.

'Yipee!' he says—and sets off for Whitehall.

'So what does the job involve?' I ask, that night.

'Nothing,' says the wolf. 'As I understand it, they mean to pay me simply for being a wolf.'