

## The Migraine Hotel

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 & Difficulties*. He won an Eric Gregory Award in 2005 and was shortlisted for Best Collection in the 2007 Forward Poetry Prizes. He is quite tall.

Also by Luke Kennard

*The Solex Brother and Other Poems (Redux)* (Salt)

*The Harbour Beyond the Movie* (Salt)

# The Migraine Hotel

LUKE KENNARD



CAMBRIDGE

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*To Andy Brown  
For patience and insight—the only real benefaction*



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## My Friend

My friend, your irresponsibility and your unhappiness delight me. Your financial problems and your expanding waist-line are a constant source of relief. I am so happy you drink more than I do and that you don't seem to enjoy it as much. When I hear you being arrogant and argumentative, my heart leaps. Your nihilism is fast becoming the richest source of meaning in my life and it is my pleasure to watch you speaking harshly to others. When you gossip about our mutual acquaintances I sigh with satisfaction. Your childish impatience delights me. The day you threw a tantrum in the middle of the supermarket was the happiest day of my life. Sometimes you say something which reveals you to be rather stupid—and I love you then, but not as much as I love you when you are callously manipulative. Your promiscuity is like a faithful dog at my side. When you talk about your petty affairs, you try to make them sound grand and important—I cherish your gaucheness and your flippancy. At times it seems you are actually without a sense of humour: I bless the day I met you. You bully people younger and weaker than you—and when others tell me about this, I am pleased. Sometimes I think you are incapable of love—and I am filled with the contentment of waking on a Saturday morning to realise I don't have to go to work. I often suspect that you do not even *like* me and my laughter overflows like water from a blocked cistern.

## The Dusty Era

for S.F.

One day he was walking behind her with several colleagues from the Embassy when the hairgrip fell out of her hair (bronze, decorated with three parrots) and clattered to the pavement. It was Stockholm, and high winter. She was deep in conversation with a girlfriend and didn't hear. His colleagues chuckled and continued to admire her legs.

They walked five blocks before she noticed her hair around her shoulders, patted the back of her head and stopped walking. She turned and looked first at the pavement and then up, where she caught his eye. She looked hurt, as if something in his face had apologised for conspiring against her with lesser men (he responded with an apologetic grimace) then she took her girlfriend's arm and walked on, hurriedly.

Two summers later, looking for cufflinks for the reception, he found the hairgrip in a pawn shop in Östersund. An event Grabes describes as, 'One of those overdetermined little moments that gradually conspired to snap his reason like a chicken bone and force him into organised religion, more credulous than even the altar boy.' (*ibid*, p. 136) It should be noted that Grabes was one of the men walking with him that winter evening in 1956, and that he was, in all probability, quite attracted to E. himself—a fact that throws Grabes's more spiteful observations into relief.

He stood with a hip-flask, complaining in the port, a parcel of Christmas presents under one arm. Each day contains a hundred subtle chasms. You can betray someone by not smiling, murder them by not saying 'Mm,' at the appropriate points in the conversation.

Years later he sat on the swingset in the playpark, an unopened letter from his daughter in his inside pocket. He was throwing pine-cones at the rusty ice-cream van. 'You should be

banned from describing anyone,' he said out loud in the condensation. Two of his would-be future biographers crashed into each other on the autobahn and were killed instantly. One of them was me, hence my omniscience.

The Embassy was dustier after that—it came to be known as the Age of Dust or the Dusty Era. A fault on the line made the intercom pop sporadically like a man about to say something difficult.

## Variations On Tears

I realise you never cry because the last of your tears have been anthologised as a *Collected* and you can't stand the idea of appendices. But what am I to make of the demonstrators playing cards with your daughters? Have they betrayed your estate? Go tell the children to gather their strength for the inevitable backlash.

I realise you never cry because each one of your tears contains a tiny stage on which a gorgeous, life-affirming comedy is always playing and it cheers you up the minute you begin. But what am I to make of the bare interior of your house? You're waiting for inspiration, right? Go tell the children to gather dust on the shelves of archive halls.

I realise you never cry because to do so would be to admit defeat to your harlequin tormentors—wringing their hands at the sides of their eyes and making bleating sounds—and you don't want to give them the satisfaction. But what am I to make of the *Make Your Own Make Your Own \_\_\_\_\_ Kit*, the first instruction of which is 'Have a good idea for something'? Could I have not worked that out for myself? Go tell the children to gather followers for our new religion.

I realise you never cry because you are a total arsehole who cannot even muster enough compassion to feel sorry for *himself*. But what am I to make of your red, blotchy eyes when, as your pharmacist, I know for a fact you are not allergic to anything? Have you, after all, been crying? Go tell the children to gather my remains from the ditch and look out for the white bull who, I'm told, is still at large.

I realise you never cry because the last time you cried four separate murders were reported on the evening news, each one more grisly and inexplicable than the last, and you incorrectly assume there was a correlation. But what am I to make of this terrifying breakfast? Are you trying to get rid of me? Go tell the children

to gather the farmers from their taverns to gather the new crop of thorns.

I realise you never cry because when you do, you are beset by birds with long tails and brightly coloured plumage and sharp, hook-like beaks who are uncontrollably drawn towards salt. But what am I to make of your statement, 'The world is not built on metaphors'? What exactly do you think the statement 'The world is not built on metaphors' is? Go tell the children to gather in the clearing and await further instruction.

## And I Saw

A false prophet slapped in the face by a wave;  
A woman screaming at her clarinet,  
'What would you have me do, then, drown you, too?'  
Remaindered novels washed up on the shore.  
A cat, baffled by a drowsy lobster, jogged  
Over the pebbles towing a little carriage.  
And the cat didn't say anything—because  
It was a cat. And the carriage was not full  
Of tiny men, a watermelon or an  
Assembly of diplomatic mice  
Because the carriage was an example  
Of man's cruelty in the name of research.  
The cat belonged to a behaviourist  
And had been raised in an environment  
Of only black horizontal lines. So  
It saw my sprinting across the beach  
To dismantle its harness as a whirl  
Of fenceposts and orange rubber balls  
And was gone faster than the better idea  
You had a moment ago. Leaving me  
Only the seagull's dreadful anthem:  
'I just want to tell you how sad we all feel.'  
The airplane trail made the cloud a wick—  
I thought I saw it starting to burn down  
And I knew we had been lucky to avoid  
Disaster so far. I shared a bench with  
A man who wanted to redefine us  
As victims of one kind or another  
Instead of whatever names we'd chosen:  
Steven Victim, Jenny Victim, Franklin  
Victim. I disagreed but couldn't speak.  
He ate raw mushrooms from a paper bag.  
In fact it was a computer game called  
*The Enormous Pointlessness of it All III*.  
When you are raised on computer games

You grow accustomed to saying 'I'm dead,'  
Several times a day. Which is not to say  
We are the first generation to feel  
So comfortable with our mortality.

## Four Neighbours

Four men live on my floor in the Edward Heath Memorial Building. The first, Patrick DeWitt, is tall and pale. His light-brown eyes and implacable mouth put you in mind of a seagull. He wears a tiny silver bucket on a chain around his neck and seems to take great pride in his appearance; his pinstripe suits are well-cut, his black hair is short and neat, but there is something sour in his expression—as if he suspects you think his appearance a sham. This man frequently loses his keys and is often seen remonstrating with the doorman who brilliantly feigns not to recognise him. His opinion of himself is so fragile that he must keep words of encouragement tacked to his wall in a disguised hand—elegant and light of touch so as to suggest a concerned lover. *Don't give up—you must trust yourself.*

The second, known to me only as Fenstermacher, is a pot-bellied lunatic with a hairy little round head like an otter. I sometimes think I can see steam rising off him. He is always gleeful and looking forward to something, but when he greets you cheerfully you should remember that this thing he is looking forward to is the £5 peepshow on the next road and that it is from this reserve of feather boas over rouged nipples and loose garter belts that his bonhomie is drawn. Before he cries—which he does little and often—his chin becomes as heavy as a mantelpiece and the effort to keep his mouth closed is such that his entire face puckers into the shape of a cat's bottom.

The third, Henry Caddy, has terrible posture and seems embarrassed to be alive. He is really a very stupid man: he looks at you as if you were about to lash out at him with your umbrella. When he talks his voice is thick and patchy, like a clarinet with a broken reed—and he stutters. His eyes are like an aerial view of two empty jars of peanut butter. He is a very allergic man, but never carries a handkerchief, preferring to run his hand up his nose, over his forehead and through his long, silky hair. He is stingy, but careless with money; just when you think you have him

down as a glutton you see him emerging from the bookies, his green hat riding low on his forehead; later you may catch him accompanying his neighbour to the peepshow or placing a box of five empty sherry bottles outside his door: he cannot even apply himself to vice with any constancy.

I have never seen my fourth neighbour, Dr. Southernhay, only heavy doors closing behind him. However, I have read his column in *The Stern Utterance*, an obscure and unpopular evening newspaper printed in the Eastern Quarter on haddock-yellow paper. In this column, apparently lacking any nobler inspiration, he writes about his other neighbours with unbridled hostility. He describes me, for instance, as 'A scrawny lozenge-sucking deviant with a gamey smell,' and speaks of my tendency to lurk and stare at passers-by. 'No doubt he stays up long into the night playing with himself,' he concludes.

## The Six Times My Heart Broke

The first time my heart broke was in an elephant graveyard. The elephant skulls looked like urinals with tusks. ‘Why have you brought me to this elephant graveyard?’ I asked. ‘It’s not working out,’ she said. ‘You love me more than I love you. I thought the elephant carcasses made a nice backdrop.’

The second time my heart broke was in the middle of the second take of an action sequence in a heist movie. ‘That wasn’t in the script,’ I said to my co-star. ‘I know,’ she replied, and we cowered behind the car door for a series of controlled explosions.

The third time my heart broke I had my heart removed and replaced by a donor heart. I dipped my former heart into a container of liquid nitrogen and dropped it onto a paving slab where it smashed. ‘Art project,’ I explained to a pedestrian.

The fourth time my heart broke was when I swept up the shards of my frozen heart and carried them in a coolbox to a nearby gallery, but while I was chatting with the gallery owner, a dog used his nose to dislodge the coolbox lid and ate the heart. ‘Maybe we could exhibit the turd,’ suggested the gallery owner.

The fifth time my heart broke was when the dog turd that was once my heart was sealed in a glass container and purchased by an elite terrorist group, exhibited as an example of Western decadence—being an especially odious example of our cultural life—and used to recruit car bombers, one of whom obliterated my pen-pal while he was drafting a response to my overly-critical review of his first novel.

The sixth time my heart broke I was working out my donor heart by swimming laps in a crater full of rainwater. 'I have nothing to say,' said a boy standing at the edge of the crater. 'Or nobody wants to hear it, anyway.' I wanted to yell and tell him not to get discouraged, but I had swallowed a duck call and so could only quack. He left and never painted the triptych he was supposed to.

## Bestiary For The Seven Days

Content, like a carnival, Monday stretches its long hair taut over its giant hollow eyes and plucks a rudimentary tune. The scientists are flicking salt at your boyfriend. They do not believe in the efficacy of occult practices, but maybe that's because they name every spark that flies from the lathe.

Bored, like a parade, Tuesday lies on the tracks, swallowing the trains as they approach its mouth and excreting them safely back onto the track moments later. The doctors are traumatised by what they have seen in the Penny Dreadful. They do not believe in the tyranny of photography, but only because they draw no distinction between art and the retina.

Exultant, like a procession, Wednesday dances on a pile of five-hundred fat dead bodies dressed in pinstripe suits; it is waving a sign which reads 'I AM THE COOLEST THING EVER!' The anthropologists are masturbating in the gazebo. They do not believe in despotic authoritarianism, but they are wrong to doubt our leaders who are doing the best they can in the circumstances.

Frightened, like a pageant, Thursday arranges antique dolls on the prow of a ship. The builders are catching tainted pilchards just off the coast of Minehead. They do not believe in divination by migratory geese, but one of them claims to have had lunch with Kahlil Gibran.

Claustrophobic, like a demonstration, Friday heats a tin of condensed milk over a camping stove and licks its lips. The dermatologists are reading Wittgenstein by the disused swimming pool. They do not believe in dance as political expression, but perhaps that's because we have to eat so much all the time that it's difficult to think about anything else.

Lonely, like a march, Saturday chews on a rolling pin. The writers are smashing one another over the head with marble clubs. They do not believe in contacting the dead, but maybe that's because most of them *are* dead.

Grateful, like a rally, Sunday peers at tiny green lights through the smoke in the clearing. The soldiers weep in the theatre courtyard. They do not believe in the healing properties of laughter, but then they have only ever laughed at their genitalia projected onto the sides of cathedrals.

## Estate

The house is a giant aluminium tray.  
There's a dried yellow residue on the walls,  
A lingering smell of garlic. However,  
The surface is so easy to clean—  
And provided the next bus doesn't whip  
The whole place away in its backdraft, I'm  
Heading into town to buy some Sheen.  
It *conducts* heat. I put on the immersion  
And within minutes I can't even touch the walls.  
Also I've got plans to put in a partition just there—  
Because essentially it's a buy-to-let;  
I'll be the live-in landlord. I'm looking for a young  
Professional couple or a trainee journalist.  
Or just anyone who doesn't mind me  
Taping myself screaming through the night.

# Wolf Nationalist

## I

After studying the census the wolf discovers that he is exactly one quarter Welsh (maternal grandmother), one quarter English (maternal grandfather), one quarter Scottish (paternal grandmother) and one quarter Northern Irish (paternal grandfather).

‘This raises all sorts of issues,’ he says, solemnly. ‘I’m not sure who I should be angriest with. Therefore I have decided to dedicate a day of the week to each. Mondays I am Welsh, Tuesdays Northern Irish, Wednesdays Scottish and Thursdays English. Friday is my day off having a nationality.’

‘What about the weekends?’ I ask.

‘On the weekends I am American,’ says the wolf. ‘Because most of my favourite stuff is American: cheeseburgers, the music of the Byrds, Herman Melville and so on.’

‘You can’t just choose—’

‘You English think you can tell everyone what to do,’ snaps the Wolf. ‘Well it won’t do. The time of your hegemony is finally at an end. Except on Thursdays.’