

THE TOLL

Luke Wright is a poet and broadcaster. His poetry stage shows have toured the world and played sold-out runs in London and Edinburgh. He is a regular contributor to BBC Radio and his verse documentary on Channel 4 was nominated for a Grierson Award. His first collection, *Mondeo Man*, was published in 2013. His first play, *What I Learned from Johnny Bevan*, won a Fringe First Award, The Stage Award For Acting Excellence and The Saboteur Award for Best Spoken Word Show. He lives in Suffolk.

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The Toll

Luke Wright

Penned in the Margins

LONDON

PUBLISHED BY PENNED IN THE MARGINS
Toynbee Studios, 28 Commercial Street, London E1 6AB
www.pennedinthemargins.co.uk

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First published 2017

Printed by Lightning Source

ISBN
978-1-908058-42-3

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Tom Chivers at Penned in the Margins for his editing prowess and all-round decency.

'A12' was first written for *The Rialto*, and then broadcast as part of BBC Local Poets on National Poetry Day 2016. 'O England Heal My Hackneyed Heart' was written for Rebecca Goss's Heart blog. 'The Slow Days' and 'Hoax' were originally broadcast on BBC Radio 4's Saturday Live. 'VAD Hospital, Saffron Walden, 1915' was commissioned by Essex County Council for Now The Last Poppy Has Fallen. 'The Ballad of Edward Dando' was originally a commission for Homework; the poem became a broadside ballad beautifully illustrated by Katie Utting, who is a constant source of inspiration.

Tim Clare spent ages editing 'The Much Harpington One-way System' for me, so thanks for that. Joe Dunthorne ripped all the rubbish bits out of *The Toll*. Thanks Joe! Thanks to Clare Pollard for continued edits, support and wisdom.

My love and gratitude to Rosy, Katie, Tom, John, and Old Man Newell. And to my Mum and Dad, for obvious reasons.

Special thanks are due to Molly Naylor for saving my life. And finally to my two boys, Aidan and Sam, who are often a lot wiser than their Dad.

*To my gentlemen travelling companions –
Dr Garry, Mr Broad and Dr Clarke*

§

O England heal my hackneyed heart.
It's shot with guilt and all those nights.
I've shared it far too often, England;
bled it almost dry for eager eyes;
traded it for other hearts
that turned to gristle in my grasp.
Nothing stirs this heart these days;
the party tricks have left it sick.
England heal my hackneyed heart.

O England heal my hackneyed heart.
Show me clumps of pastille homes on hills,
a couple holding hands in Hayle
and chalk-stone words of love in Dorset fields.
Give me roads the motor clings to,
herons over tidal mud
and skinny kids on wild swims —
that Constable-bucolic thing.
England heal my hackneyed heart.

O England heal my hackneyed heart.
Wash it in the North Sea foam,
wrap it up in honey dawn,
make poultices from April dusk
and chicken soup from sleepy days
until it leaps and bangs its cage;
until it thumps me with its thud
and gives me all the grief it should.
England heal my hackneyed heart.

The Toll

The Slow Days

The slow days down to New Year's Eve arrive.
The sherry fug of Christmas afternoon
is swapped for sodden walks and turkey pie
and wrapping paper turns to ash in grates.

In Falmouth, Fishguard, Fakenham and Frodsham
cabin fever seizes naughty boys.

In Narbeth, Nayland, Normanton and Nantwich
fathers rip the batteries out of toys.

And life plods on like boiled Brussels sprouts.
The papers ration out what news they can:
it's floods or sales or National Archive scraps.
Obituaries march sombre to the front.

In Droitwich, Douglas, Dewsbury and Dawlish
the grown-up single children leave for town.

In Bolton, Bedwas, Basingstoke and Barrhead,
the tinsel round the bannisters slips down.

And so we turn to retail parks and malls,
roam listlessly from shop to shop to shop,
half-dazzled in the vast resplendent halls
then join the traffic slowly shunting home.

In Greenock, Glynneath, Glossop, Goole and Gosport
chocolate tins are cellophane and air.
In Halstead, Harlech, Holyhead and Hexham
Grandad guffs with gusto in his chair.

And minutes fall like needles from the tree
as neighbours call round: *is it bins tonight?*
The last aunties are taken to their trains
till finally the last hurrah pulls up.

In Colchester, Kirkcaldy, Cowes and Croydon
they're counting down, all pints and lily-flesh.
In Potton, Prescott, Portishead and Paignton
they snap the dead year off and start afresh.

A12

England's crude appendix scar,
the Essex/Suffolk artery,
salt-baked, potholed, chocked with cars
across the Orwell, Colne and Lea,
the Roman's great, paved *Inter V*.

From Blackwall mouth to Breydon Water,
worlds away from London noise,
the Orbital's delinquent daughter,
friend to suits in souped-up toys
and woodchip-larynxed *good ol' boys*.

Where Witham trees are linocuts
against an endless swirl of blues,
where rat-faced booners slice you up
and eighteen-wheelers rumble-snooze
en route to Brussels, Bonn or Bruges.

Worst road in Britain, so they say,
a dim-lit strip of late-night truth.
You'll never be a motorway;
your tar tattoos are too uncouth,
ground down for years by tyre and hoof.

But I will have you, ruts and all;
your grey macadam's in my bone.

You take me from the fug and sprawl
to Suffolk's icy brine and foam:
you take me home.

Dad Reins

for Sam

The platform-schlep and keycard-shuffle done,
I'm back home again. And, of course, there's change.
New words and habits, but the biggest one:
you've ditched your pram, you're now in baby reins.
No more for us the quick nip up the shop!
You lunge and circle like a moon-faced dog
as I adjust from back-combed jobbing fop
to paunchy dad. My nightly monologue
of measured, risqué quips switched for a set
of weary nags and grinning faux amazement.
I'll step from stage to stage but won't forget
these sweet staccato wobbles up this pavement.
Roam now, my boy, don't worry, you'll be fine.
I'll be your tether, Sam, because you're mine.