

NOTES ON THE SONNETS

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ALSO BY LUKE KENNARD

POETRY

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The Migraine Hotel (Salt, 2009)
Planet-shaped Horse (Nine Arches, 2011)
The Necropolis Boat (Holdfire, 2012)
A Lost Expression (Salt, 2013)
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Mise en Abyme (Tungsten, 2019)

FICTION

- Holophin* (Penned in the Margins, 2012)
The Transition (Fourth Estate, 2017)

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Penned in the Margins

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All of this takes place at the same house party. The order of the sonnets is determined by events. They are to be seen as improvisations, or annotations, or variations.

*Notes
on the
Sonnets*

I

Sometimes a party feels like a portal you have to pass through, sometimes not. I don't know with cocaine. It's like everyone cheating on the same cryptic crossword (9). My ideal recreational drug would be a pill that makes people feel more insecure and I'm the only one at the party not taking it. I'm in the kitchen with a man who says he can recite any of Shakespeare's sonnets if someone gives him a number from 1 to 154. And I'm like, Wow, that's great. 66? And he says, no. Not 66. Anything but that. I'm like, Okay, hahaha, you're full of shit. He says, I'm not lying, I'm just not reciting sonnet 66, tonight or any other night. I hate it. This has honestly never happened to me before. Give me any other number. And I find that hard to believe, because if you're asked to pick a random number from 1 to 154 the chances are it might be 66. But I sip from the rum and Coke someone gave me and I sigh and I say, okay, 102. And he starts, I swear this is a true story, he starts cold, *My love is strenghten'd though more weak in seeming...* I turn on the convection hob and put my palm on it.

You give me the private signal to rescue you and I have to interrupt you kissing an artist on the staircase. I can tell that she is an artist because she is so covered in paint and so, now, are you. The way construction workers are always building things, the way demolition crews never really get to take a day off: the demolition never ends, they take it with them when they go. What's our excuse? A writer is always looking for creative ways to fall into a threshing machine. You're all, Woah, who invited the oncologist. We're talking to an award-winning double-act. Do you get tired, we ask them, of being a double-act? Do people expect you still to be a double-act when you're off-duty? But they say it's okay because their act is based on the fact that they have no natural repartee. You have to do something which destroys you, some personal brand which subdues your nature: everybody knows that. What you draw out with one undefiant glance. Oh, you. O, you. I know. We will give each other a disease to which we alone are the cure, the cure that reinfects, the reinfection that's the cure.

We have been told that the perfect human is at the party. We look forward to meeting them and finding out what they're like. Unassailable. Beyond reproach. Naturally there are rumours of their misdeeds. The perfect human is not perfect; this assumption reflects badly on us. Yes, the perfect human has done some pretty bad shit, but they've also been through a lot. They came from humble origins, but now they write celebrated papers demythologising the "humble origins" trope. They keep their money in a dirty pillowcase and distribute it generously. They don't really *like* the one art for which they are recognised or the field in which they incontestably dominate; they prefer NASCAR. They say this in interviews a lot. There is not a single act of cruelty, selfishness and abuse of power the perfect human has committed which cannot be fully explained by systemic issues they themselves have gracefully endured and emerged triumphant. This is what we mean when we say the perfect human does not exist: we mean they are like Euler's Identity equation. An equation so beautiful it has been compared to a Shakespearean sonnet. Five complex numbers are plotted on the complex plane and together form a "house shape." When we meet them we will say that we are big fans. Big fans, the perfect human will say. My father worked in a

factory that made big fans. *But look at you now, perfect human, we will say, look at you now.*

I rarely think of my son when I’m at a party, and then I remember something he said last night before falling asleep on my arm and it floors me. Maybe just come with me. This is me in the hallway talking to someone I don’t really like and the effort hurts my jaw due to the build-up of lactic acid. Maybe not. The room is blood-temperature. As if I could wake up with an ashtray mouth and find that I dreamed the last 7 years in a single night. If I thought about *him* it would be as if I’d brought him with me and I want to stress that it’s not him I’d be embarrassed about or even my own self-consciousness. I once bought bright red shoes and immediately regretted it. I brought my kid with me – can you believe that? It’s the people who’d say *Why is there a seven-year-old at this party?* I wouldn’t want their paucity of spirit / adaptation so exposed. Choose what you give yourself to, beautiful boy. It happens that I’ve seen exactly forty winters, even if that’s just a code for “lots”. I remember confronting you about the six empty boxes of Jaffa Cakes under your bed and you wondered why I’d assume you had anything to do with it. Oh babe, my apology for absence, mon semblable, my old excuse.

Without meaning to we’re taking photos of each other taking photos of each other again. We’re outside the kitchen window getting high around a tin table until all I can talk about is a Rubik’s cube where every face is made of another smaller Rubik’s cube, but it would only work if they’re spheres. Then I get quite agitated and demand someone fetches me the pepper grinder because of the terpenoids, and I like the way the word feels in my mouth so much I just keep saying it, *terpenoids terpenoids terpenoids*. Unblessed in the evening air, unblessed. There’s such an obsession with wrinkles in sonnets 1-74 it’s as if the whole sequence had been commissioned by a luxury skin care salve. I don’t know about you, but I didn’t have children so that they’d *look* like me; it feels weird even having to point that out. Although, you say, head cocked, reflected in the window I just photographed the people photographing themselves through, it’s actually quite important being pretty, isn’t it? More than we care to admit? I like having attractive friends. I laugh because you do. That’s a low-key outrageous thing to say. No it’s not. Anyway, everyone’s attractive. There is a warmth in just leaning against the windowsill with you I’ll come back to. I would like you to lie on top of me in a pile of coats. I would like you to hold me and knock insistently on the top of my head. I would like you to bask in the good thoughts I have about you.

I think I told you about my friend who, when we were 17, had a date tattooed on his ankle and to my shame I can't remember the exact date – *XX.05.25* – because our idea was that we should all meet up in exactly 25 years' time on Hamm Hill, surrounded by living flowers, whatever else was going on in our lives, whatever we'd done, whatever had been done to us, whatever, just drive over there from wherever we'd washed up, drawn by our own sweet skill or otherwise, and meet up at precisely 6pm on that day. But the consensus was that we'd probably only remember it if we got the date tattooed on our ankles; we didn't think it possible to remember Happy Hour in the perfectly dingy Bell and Crown a whole 25 years later although, of course, I do. And he was the sweetest and most impulsive and he went ahead and got the tattoo the next week and we were like... Oh god, you took that seriously? 25 years seemed like a comically long time to us. He was justifiably angry – we'd agreed! It was a pact! We were all, No! It was hypothetical and also tattoos sound really painful. That's endearing and also really awful, you say. You check my bare ankle to be sure it wasn't me.

From now on I am going to audit this party which means I will be present but not in the capacity of consuming anything or actively engaging with anyone. It’s like one of the more inscrutable parables / brutal parallels: the master gives one talent each to three servants. I’ve just checked and it turns out that one talent is 33kg of silver, which is worth *loads*. Anyway, one of them invests it; one of them really goes to town on it, hedge bets it or something like the first recorded disaster capitalist and, hey, makes a killing; but the third servant... he just literally *buries* it in the ground like a fucking idiot and mumbles something about knowing the master to be a ruthless man so he wanted to make sure nothing happened to the talent. The master is not impressed by this at all. That other secret chord which David played and the Lord *hated* it. Telling someone they’re too hard on themselves is the kindest thing you can say to anyone; *you are a rare, self-sabotaging tree. How have you even grown in this crummy environment?* Also, probably, it’s true and they may have some useful pointers. The day will come when they will throw us out of the temple and believe they are serving God and the devil will say, It’s got a little complicated.