WRITERS MOSAIC

FIFTY FIRST DATES

Luke Kennard

I

Did you always used to get Hamlet and Jesus mixed up? Me too! They have a similar, how you say, *mien*. “Unbox my heart!” could be either.

The restaurant looks like every restaurant in a film you saw as a child and this is just how you imagined your adult life: a TV show / where it’s never quite clear / whether it’s you or the food / being reviewed / being reviewed. *[Music fades out.]* And your date is the director – they’re a little strung out. *I’m sorry for swearing so much and for slamming my hand down on the next table, I’m sorry to my fellow diners as well.* He is never quite without his stethoscope: that’s a red flag. Red flag dot com.

O mine indignity, softly through the renamed city, and unrepentant, more’s the pity, and if you’re lucky life evens out at roughly 3.2.

II

So that's something we have in common with every novel. I have *got* to ask something other than how was your day. I already asked that (it was fine, it was pretty good). Do you like death metal?

A friend of mine, who works in bioethics, developed an ointment that *cures* the covers of death metal albums. Spread a little on, rub a little in, and the howling skulls are enfleshed and smiling; the line-ups of pallid, evil-set boys in garish makeup become promising young men in smart casual attire; the hideous towers made of flesh and weeping sores in a skyscape of brimstone? Unblemished pink columns reaching into a clear blue sky!

Now *that's* religion. I always tell my sons that they should play the triangle in an orchestra. It teaches you when to intervene: almost never. It teaches you when to sit very still: almost always.

III

I absolutely adore you, I tell you, a hand shielding my mouth. It's a dystopia where dystopias are illegal, or some shit. Naturists in a never-ending table-tennis tournament. Necessary and even beautiful, perhaps, but don't we go to great lengths to avoid semantic satiation in any other context? When a man starts saying the same word over and over again we put something in his mouth.

Jesus is on the radio, the child says, and they lead you by the hand to the kitchen to hear Him for yourself, there are biscuit

crumbs under your bare feet, and you have to explain to the child that's not Jesus on the radio, it's Walter Cronkite, the most trusted man in America; America didn't exist when Jesus did, you explain to the child, barely existed when West Bromwich Albion did. The child is not having any of this.

IV

Compare childhoods betwixt sharing plates. Where I used to live, I would pop my head out then withdraw it quickly. It was a rough neighbourhood, enough to make the string quartet that shadowed me incongruous. And I would get beaten up, the recipe for a cool butternut squash risotto tattooed on my left bicep.

Footage of a man with a big black bag of cameras approaching the camera; I was in my ninepins era I was in my dowsing era, tears in my carbonara, please talk in my good ear.

Thank you but I've got it, the drip on wheels, largesse of the currently abled, that sinking feeling, that loving feeling, the funk, the love I need to see me through, an Audi S e-tron GT, et cetera.

As a large language model I will never know how it feels to drop my son or daughter off at university and say *See you later! Don't read too much Hegel, sweetheart!* but I do know how it feels to drop a soluble pill into a glass of water: I know how it feels to be the soluble pill *and* the water. The extent to which we were ever here and the extent to which I ever had you is the extent to which I am losing you. That sounded a little maudlin, yeah, a rather pale cast of thought.

V

Some famous ventriloquist's dummies: Peanut, Slappy, Walter Snerd. And we outlast them all. The kitchen is closing, we have overstayed our welcome – isn't that a very 21st century feeling, Walter? Why yesh, Luke. Time was, moonlit guitars and metal buckets of ale, a breeze to soothe us, scattering handfuls of corn to the chickadees, we didn't even think that was possible! Doubt that the stars are fire!

There was a kind of fighting. Like most writers I'd have some sympathy for my own firing squad, I guess – no, no, it is not habitual in my culture to leave a tip. Also I'm broke so we must come back tomorrow and do a few shifts washing up, for money is light and blows away. Tonight though I will drop you back at yours, riding on the foal of an ass, never quite myself between the neon, an improvisatory quality to the dialogue born of years of study, and all our sins remember'd.

Luke Kennard

Luke Kennard is a poet and novelist who lives in the West Midlands. His sixth collection, *Notes on the Sonnets*, won the Forward Prize in 2021. His latest novel is *Black Bag* (2026), which was longlisted for the Booker Prize. He teaches at the University of Birmingham.

A recording of this piece can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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