





 **we are**
no longer
the smart
kids in 
 **class**
 
  



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David Huebert



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for my early readers:
Elizabeth, Rachel, Ron

to my manuscript in the slush pile

I hope you are comfortable, and that your neighbours are mediocre at best. I hope your margins are crisp as the day I hit print and cradled you while you emerged, still warm, from your noisy womb. I'll never forget the

moment I wrapped the manila blanket over your shoulders and lovingly snipped that excess length of packing tape. I hope there has been no coffee spilled on you and that you aren't too close to the radiator. These days I'm sure there's no second-hand smoke, but I picture it nonetheless.

The editor is male—fifties, thick glasses, broom moustache. He picks you up first thing in the morning, and as he reads your name a smile crosses his lips—he already appreciates your dry sense of humour and your understated brilliance. He wets his index finger, turns the title page, and embarks.



why our parents worked so hard

You catch the spider
between a water glass
and a piece of paper.

You put it on the table.
It's a big one, about the size
of a head of garlic.

It feels its way around the space,
soon realizing there's no way out.

It stands still, clever thing,
to preserve the oxygen.

You light the joint
and lift the glass.

You blow a steady stream of smoke
and put the glass back down.

You watch the spider
forget how to walk.
It stumbles and slows.

A few minutes pass.
The spider stops moving.
You are asleep on the couch.

hearing rilke's *sonnets to orpheus*

Silence and ears, flowers and tongues.
The drone of muteness:
this odd sad song is steeped in it.

Let us listen to what the song
drowns out. Let us, like good
Heideggerians, tape our mouths
and cultivate the ring of stillness.

While we're at it, let us hear
these words as gerunds, not nouns—
beginning, opening, ending—
and preserve the process, catch it in a stutter.

Now pull off the tape, sing again—
sing the toneless, odd-volumed song
of the deaf. And rejoice. Revel in discord,
this grotesque limp of a tongue.

answering rilke's *sonnets to orpheus*

Sadness of all life, life of all sadness—
pouring death into fourteen lines,
you poured it well, smooth and steady,
twisting just so to catch the drip.

But I pity your ecstatic butterfly—
clutched in the grip of some poetic hiccough,
arrested flutter of the diaphragm.

I pity your fountain mouth,
your sleeping ear,
your blackened, aging chin.

And I pity your monuments,
so lonely, so unerected.

I pity the lyre—its indefinite,
soundless echo. Its player:

tired fingers, tired eyes,
nothing more to look back for,
yet the song goes on.

to a beer-swillin' poet

Hey man, I know it's dank and dreary,
down where you made your bed,
but I just thought I'd write to let you know,
not much has changed.

The drunk tank is still much the same.
Smells like piss and poetry.
No mattress, just a cold bench on an August night.
There's a bunch of us in here,
the others bang away on the plexiglass, whining,
"I'm not even drunk, I didn't even do anything!"

The one guy uses his best sober-business-man voice to say,
"I'm the assistant manager of a restaurant."
The cop is unimpressed.

Down the hall they bang and holler,
bang and holler.
If dogs in the pound could speak
it wouldn't make much difference,
this is how they'd sound.

There's a shirtless man stretched across the floor,
napping with cherubic half-moon mouth.
He's got matted curls for a pillow — better than concrete.
The other guys, they call him Jesus and 'Hey-Zeus.'
They laugh and laugh.

Turns out the one guy manages a Wendy's in Stellarton.
Another guy asks if I've got a cigarette.
I show him the nicotine patch on my arm,
offering it with a smirk.

One by one they let them out,
the great drunk tank exodus of 2009.
First Jesus, 'Hey-Zeus,' or Michael,
as the officer calls him.
They're old friends.
We're all friends in here.

First Michael is gone,
then the one guy,
then the other,
and I'm alone with the fluorescent lights.
They tell you to sleep it off,
beneath lights that stab your brain.
Maybe I'm not drunk enough.
Down the corridor the dogs bang and howl,
bang and howl.

I'm taking a leak when he comes, the officer.
A plexiglass rap denotes his watchful eye.
My guardian, my protector.
As he opens the door I feel the urge
to tell him: I'm not even drunk,
I didn't even do anything.

“Come with me please.”
He escorts me down the hallway.
Hope mounts as we pass one cell,
then another, then the next.
They’re all empty.
We stop.

On the left is the cell with the snarling dogs.
They’re pressed against the door, banging and yelling,
banging and yelling,
four angry bodies in this little cage.
Now five.

I sit with a grunt and a growl.
We swap stories, explain that we’re all innocent and sober.
The pack solidifies.
Me, sleeping guy (there’s always one), French guy,
Native kid, and skinny guy.
We’re buddies.

Soon French guy starts pounding his knuckles on the wall,
barking and snarling, scuffing his feet.
Native kid gets up to take a leak.
This is when the fun starts.
He lets out a long stream,
somewhere between the puke-encrusted toilet seat
and the bench.

French guy is livid.
He screams and curses, bares his teeth.
Bangs on the glass and yells,
“He’s fuckin’ *pissin’* on the floor in here!”
With his bare feet, jumping in the piss-pool,
sloshing the puddle under the door,
trying to kick it at the cops—
watching, regulating.

This is when the fun starts.
Sleeping guy stands up, dazed.
Slowly gets his bearings. A big boy.
Swings at Native kid, then French guy;
they’re both face-down in the piss, bleeding.
He bounds over to skinny guy,
starts pummelling his ribcage.
I cringe in the corner, feet on the bench,
flinching with the swings and splashes of piss and blood.

Sleeping guy turns, huge fists clenched—glares at me.
Eyes out of focus, frenzied.
There’s no point to pleading,
all he sees is a heavy bag.

I try to remember your poem as I raise my palms,
but all I can think of is my teeth.
He turns back to skinny guy and starts on him again.
It’s not pretty, but it’s not me.

After a few minutes,
when everyone in the cell but me is nicely tenderized,
the cops come in.
Sleeping guy swings in all directions.
It only takes a taze or two to get him down.
Then the officer looks at me, the one who checked me in,
said it wouldn't be long because I wasn't very drunk.
His face bleeds recognition.
His face says, "I'm sorry," the only apology I'll receive.

He leaves, comes back—lets me out.
I don't mention it.
He knows, I know. There's really nothing to say.
As I leave, something compels me to blurt, "Thanks officer."

We're all friends in here.

roland

O, Roland, with your fat cheeks
that always glowed red, I'm sorry.

Sorry I stole your girlfriend
in high school, stole her like an unneeded
base, just for the joy of the steal.

That night she said both my names—
first and last, over and over.

Reminded me of the time they called
it out through the PA, when I scored
that game-winning goal.

Same leapfrog of pride and shame.
Same urge to be nameless, alone.

A few lurches and we were finished.
I put my pants on and she went back.
Back downstairs, to the party, and you.

christina

O, Christina, with your Kalamata skin
and your bold black eyes, I'm sorry.

Sorry we stole into some little-brother-bedroom
while Roland stayed downstairs smoking joints
and bragging, like he always did, about you.

I liked him but I'd never been with a girl
so dark and soft and beautifully swollen.
You were like a cello, just as sad and amber.

I made a joke. Your eyes flashed, and I knew.
I'm sure it sounds foul and misogynistic, but that's
how I was back then. I'm sorry for that too.

Mostly I'm sorry I couldn't see too well in the
liquor-drenched darkness, sorry I didn't play your
strings more sweetly, sorry we only had that

one time and when I ran into you a few weeks later
you said yes you were still with Roland, no you didn't
remember anything. And that maybe that was true.

the porn we watched

We talked about the porn we watched.
It felt good, it felt good
to know that someone else liked
something secret, sacred, foul.

I liked men with enormous
feet, you liked girls with hair
on their chins and it felt good,
it felt good to tell each other

this was okay, even kind of cool.
We were ten, neither one of us
capable of producing anything.
But we masturbated, oh we masturbated,

and it felt good, it felt good to thrash
and sweat side by side with a sweet
Catholic boy (your mother's mealtime
chant still rolling through my mind:

"Hands hands hands, thank you
God for hands"). We weren't sure
what would happen but we knew
it would be something huge, something

delightfully wrong. And of course
we were caught, shamed, and barred
from walking to school with the cool boys.
And even that, in its way, felt good.

ridiculous gods

When you were seven your father
told you you'd never make the NHL.

You cried then, you wailed to your gods—
Pavel Bure, Kirk Muller, Ron MacLean.

Your father gasped and clung to the wheel.
He cried to his gods too—
Ken Dryden, Peter Gzowski, John Donne.

The world unfolded as it does: you took your MA
in English, received funding and accolades,
prepared to join the family business.

You became a phenom of Friday night pickup,
chased the scoring race in the Thursday men's league.

And that classmate—the one who was drafted
but couldn't quite make the cut, whose talents

you coveted with a crazed, disorienting
lust, who wasn't quite Sydney Crosby
but played several years of Swedish pro—

you remember how at junior high practice
his dad always said, "At least they're having fun,"
and you forgive your father and his ridiculous gods.

in case you were wondering

The first step was losing the trench coat.
Then you came to Shakespeare class
bare-nailed and stripped of eyeliner.
A week later the lipstick was gone.

It wasn't that you were turning your back
on your postpunk roots.
You were simply becoming a poet.
Not like Ginsberg or Bukowski,
you were more the English Breakfast type.

You began to talk about Larkin,
measure your Scotch by the finger.
You started putting *after Ted Hughes*
beneath the titles of your poems.

You didn't know I was on the bus
the day I heard you speaking at full volume
about enjambment, metonymy,
and the gustatory image.

You used the word prosody
several times in a sentence,
and that was enough.

The sweater-vest was too much.
Soon it was a moustache, a bowtie,
and a wispy, grad student girlfriend.

By the end there was no need to tell me—
I knew. I wouldn't be receiving any more
of your late night texts.

But, in case you were wondering,
I haven't deleted them.
And from time to time I still
show this one around at parties:

I want to hunt your Moby Dick all night.
Love, Captain Ahab.

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about the author

A child of Halifax, Nova Scotia, David Huebert now lives in London, Ontario, where he is working on a PhD.

