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STRANGE LOVE, STALLION SEX PLANES, AND THE FREEDOM OF CONSTRAINTS: AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID HUEBERT

DAVID HUEBERT WAS BORN AND RAISED IN HALIFAX. After earning a Bachelor of Arts degree from Dalhousie University, he moved to British Columbia to pursue a Master of Arts degree at the University of Victoria. He then worked odd jobs for three years (as a server, textbook editor, and publisher's sales representative) before enrolling in the Ph.D. program in English at the University of Western Ontario. At the same time that he was pursuing an academic career, he was also publishing poetry and fiction in various literary magazines, including *The Dalhousie Review*, *Event*, *The Fiddlehead*, *Grain*, *Maisonneuve*, and *The Puritan*.

In 2015 Huebert published his first poetry collection, *We Are No Longer the Smart Kids in Class*, which captures the experience of growing up by addressing such topics as drunkenness, falling in love, and awkward teenage sex. While some of the poems reflect a degree of nostalgia for the formative years of adolescence, many of them also explore more serious themes concerning contemporary life, such as the climate crisis, social media, and consumer capitalism. For example, "Life After Twitter" imagines what happens to a social media account after the death of its user, and "Radicals" offers a critique of popular youth trends that promise a kind of pseudo-individualism. Reviews of the book were overwhelmingly positive, and critics agreed that it heralded the emergence of a fresh and unique voice in Canadian literature—one of keen intellect, penetrating social awareness, and an abiding love of the wild and the strange. Ian Colford even described Huebert as "a pornographer of the heart," who "shies away from nothing" and who is "sure to give the Canadian poetry scene a much-needed slap in the face."

In 2016 Huebert's poem "Colloquium: J. T. Henry and Lady Simcoe on Early Ontario Petrocolonialism" won the 2016 Walrus Poetry Prize. At the

same time, he was also beginning to win major literary awards for his short stories, including *The Dalhousie Review's* Short Story Contest, *The Antigoni- ish Review's* Sheldon Currie Fiction Prize, and the Marguerite Dow Canadian Heritage Award. He also had, as he humbly describes it, the “enormously lucky” experience of winning the CBC Short Story Prize for his haunting and heart-rending story “Enigma,” which focuses on a woman who has to euthanize her horse and her partner’s efforts to understand and empathize with her pain. The jury statement described this story as “a vivid personal narrative of remarkable spiritual and emotional grace,” which provides “an eloquent meditation on the mystery of life and death, love and grief, both human and animal.” The story was subsequently published in Air Canada’s *enRoute* magazine, and Huebert received a grant from the Canada Council for the Arts as well as a writing residency at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity.

The following year he published his first story collection, *Peninsula Sinking*, which similarly addresses the themes of love, death, and grief by focusing on the lives of various Maritimers struggling to find meaning in a world teetering on the brink of ruin. The book was described by Alexander MacLeod in Biblical terms: “This book is Noah’s freaking Ark. All of life, animal and human, is intimately crammed inside of it and the whole vessel has been expertly designed to stand the surrounding storm.” MacLeod’s assessment of the book as “Noah’s freaking Ark” is certainly apt. Not only is *Peninsula Sinking* full of animals—studhorses and humpback whales, chattering dolphins and beloved dogs—but it is also deeply concerned with the question of survival in our current age of rising sea levels, genetic engineering, and mass migration. David Layton described Huebert as “one of those young writers who has the ability and confidence to present the everyday in extraordinary ways,” and Robert Wiersma similarly claimed that the book had established Huebert as “one of Canada’s most impressive young writers.” The collection was later shortlisted for the Alistair MacLeod Short Fiction Prize, was a runner up for the Danuta Gleed Literary Award, and won the Jim Connors Dartmouth Book Award.

In 2018 Huebert completed his dissertation, which focuses on human-animal relationships in the works of such authors as Jack London and Philip K. Dick. He then returned to Dalhousie University, where he now works as an Assistant Professor of English and Creative Writing. His second poetry collection, *Humanimus*, is set for release in the fall of 2020, and he is cur-

rently completing his first novel as well as his second story collection.

The following interview was conducted in Halifax between 2018 and 2019.

Brittany Kraus: When did you first start writing?

David Huebert: I did some songwriting as an undergraduate. In fact, I was in the first ever high-fusion power rock band, as we called it.

Kraus: I don't even know what that means.

Huebert: No one does—that was the joke.

Kraus: What were your songs about?

Huebert: The usual embarrassments. I think our best moments were when we shot for the apocalyptic impulse. I did one song called “Hollow Man” that had some legs. I was mostly interested, then, in songwriting that didn't take itself too seriously. The Nietzsche-reader in me demanded parody. Actually it's an impulse I find in a lot of students. They want to write around their subject, and they're a little anxious about the vulnerability involved in approaching their subject directly and taking its emotions seriously. I tell my students that writers have to be experts in emotion, and they giggle uncomfortably.

Kraus: When did you start writing more seriously?

Huebert: In 2010 I was working on my master's degree at the University of Victoria, and I saw a poster for a poetry contest on campus. I decided to submit a poem about a night I'd spent in the drunk tank in Moncton, New Brunswick, and the poem won and got published in *Event*. At that point, I started taking writing more seriously. I finished my degree, worked for three years, kept sending out work, and kept getting rejected. After the mandatory five years, I finally started publishing.

Kraus: Mandatory five years?

Huebert: For some people it's forever and for others it's shorter. But it seems pretty standard for a writer to have a period where they're writing and writing and writing and getting nothing published. Not everyone submits during that period. My process was to submit, and every time something got rejected, I would edit it. It's a nice way to release things and get them back with fresh eyes.

Kraus: Many of the poems in your first collection focus on the environment, which seems to be one of your main interests. I'm thinking especially of "Spring Melt, Fernie," in which you write

Not nature,
because you're wary of the idea.

(Don't abide the poets
and their oil-slick whispers)

Not nature,
but a place to encounter elk,

marmots, eagles, and the
needle-sharp bite of glacial air.

Why do you insist here that the landscape is "not nature"?

Huebert: I've had the great pleasure of being involved with a writing group with Tom Cull, Madeline Bassnett, Blair Trewartha, and Andy Verboom. We—especially Tom and I—call ourselves "Dirty Nature Writers." At first this was a joke, but now it's something we take very seriously. So I guess I was already working through those thoughts in 2013, when I first drafted that poem. Here's a shorthand: the word "Nature" is hugely problematic because (like traditional Romantic nature writing) it creates a false binary. We live in an age where all nature is corrupted, polluted, and engineered. The concept of "Nature" tries to evacuate responsibility by suggesting that there's a place "outside" that remains untouched, untrammelled, immense, sublime, pristine, and safe. It's a beautiful lie.

Kraus: You also describe poetic representations of nature as “oil-slick whispers,” but what does this mean? How is the mining of nature as a source of literary inspiration similar to other forms of resource extraction?

Huebert: Mining nature for literature is intensely fraught, but I try to confront the problems directly and to do critical work, such as calling the concept of “Nature” into question and illuminating collisions between the human and the so-called natural world. I think environmental poetry has lots of potential to add new insights and illuminate strange connections in this hugely important and hugely complicated world-historical conversation as long as it resists the lures of “Nature.”

Kraus: At some point you started writing fiction as well. When did this happen, and why did you make this shift?

Huebert: I was always doing both. It just took longer for the stories to be published.

Kraus: Was there ever a breakthrough moment, so to speak, when you thought, yes, I finally know who I am as a writer?

Huebert: I hope to have many more artistic breakthrough moments, but one I often think of is a story titled “Without Seeing,” which was published in the spring 2014 issue of *The Dalhousie Review*. It had been rejected a few times, but I felt it had something. I remember getting the story back from another journal that rejected it, and then I improved it here and there and completely changed the ending. The new ending was kind of a “holy shit, I’m allowed to do that?” moment. I found a new level of address, and it was just a thrill at the time—empowering and exciting. And then I started doing all my stories like that, with different ways into a kind of heightened lyricism.

Kraus: The ending is quite moving, as the main character (a blind, single, middle-aged, unemployed, and rather sad musician) finally gets together with a female artist on whom he has a crush, yet it remains unclear whether the closing scene is real or imagined. Is this uncertainty part of what you mean by a “new level of address”?

Huebert: Yes, I made the ending entirely speculative, as every sentence is a question, and the new level of address is the heightened feeling that (I hope) comes out through a rhythm of rhetorical mounting. It's a climbing rhythm, and the idea is that the imagined outcome is vivid enough that it shouldn't matter for readers whether this really happens or not (though they're welcome to guess!). That was very new for me, and I don't know where it came from.

Kraus: The main character in this story also feels guilty for the death of a dog that he was responsible for walking, and this theme becomes even more central to your story "Enigma," which focuses on a woman's relationship with her dying horse. What is it about this theme that you find so fascinating?

Huebert: My sister is very close with horses, and she's always been a kind of model for me for thinking about animals. "Enigma" was actually inspired by the death of her horse, who was sick. At the time I was trying to phone her, but she was busy of course and wouldn't answer. I wanted to reach her, to comfort her, and I couldn't. So I reached out to her emotionally in a way that came naturally.

Kraus: The main character's partner also finds it difficult to comfort her, and to some degree he seems incapable of understanding the depth of her grief. This reminds me of something you said in another interview—that "animals can move us in ways that other humans just can't." Why do you think that is the case?

Huebert: Yes, that's crucial for me, and it's one of the things I'm going for in all my (many) pieces featuring animals. On the one hand, I'm interested in the wildness and animality of literature itself. But, on the other hand, I also think that animals resist us and our codes of knowing. They have their own para-human ways of being, and that's one of the things we find compelling about them. Socially, they give us a break from being human. Aesthetically, they give us a rift in the human that I think many of us find relieving and nourishing. Animals are mute, and there is a great calm in that. But they also—and this is vital—have their own ways of speaking to us, which are irreducible and can never be bent or rent into language.

Kraus: When I think about “Enigma,” I also think about the scene where the main character imagines that she is riding her horse underwater, “part whale, now, but still somehow the same.” The horse-whale hybrid is such a striking image. How did you come up with it?

Huebert: The idea was bobbing around for a while. I had a whale-watching experience that (trite but true) affected me profoundly, but I didn’t know what to do with the whale that was swimming huge and dark through my mind. Eventually, when I put the horse and the whale together, I thought, “oh, I have something interesting here.” The rhythms of the horse and the rhythms of the whale are what made that story succeed.

Kraus: *Peninsula Sinking* also deals with the theme of climate change—in particular, the problem of rising sea levels and the idea of land sinking into the ocean. How is this theme related to the problems facing your characters?

Huebert: This is the central question of the book and of many of our lives. The discourse of climate change can be so overwhelming. It moves so easily towards the apocalyptic. Meanwhile, we all still have to go on living. So how do characters live their lives today—that is, how does the living of an emotional life change in the shadow of the current climate crisis? In a way, this is what all contemporary fiction should ask. And here fiction can do work—the work of emotional and aesthetic speculation—that science can’t.

Kraus: Some of the stories in this collection also address environmental issues through the history of industrial accidents. I’m thinking in particular of the story “Drift,” which refers to the Westray Mine disaster. Why was this event so important to you?

Huebert: I grew up hearing about the Westray disaster. In fact, the story begins with a scene borrowed from my mother’s experience, as she first heard about the disaster while she was in a grocery store and an announcement came over the loudspeaker. That detail always stuck with me, but I never knew what to do with it. In the story, I have the narrator (quite removed from my mother in lots of other ways) experiencing that scene while holding a piece of meat, contemplating that it used to be alive.

Kraus: There is also a certain animality to the human characters in the book. I especially noticed this in relation to your story “Horse People,” which includes a description of a pregnant woman who dreams of her unborn child as having “hooves and a tail and not in a good way.”

Huebert: My wife was pregnant when I was writing “Horse People,” and it was actually the last piece I wrote. Pregnancy is a crazy thing. The physical transformation is wild, as are all the cultural things that go along with it. There is a profound animality about it—a real biological kind of awareness.

I was actually going to pre-natal yoga at the time, and there’s a little riff about it in *Peninsula Sinking*. I was the only man ever to attend this particular pre-natal yoga, and I think they were happy to have me there. But there were instructions like taking the blueberry into your vagina and holding it there. There are a lot of cultures of shame around pregnancy. I think it’s a wild thing to think about.

Kraus: The whole stallion sex plane thing is also weird and wild.

Huebert: The stallion sex plane—something touched on just in passing—is one of my favourite images in the collection. The idea is that a private plane full of pedigreed racing stallions perpetually flies around the world in order to appear briefly in one city or another where the owners of breeding mares will pay millions of dollars to breed the pair. It’s about excess and performance. Freezing sperm and activating it through artificial insemination would surely be more sensible and economical, but the owners want the sex—they want to see it. For me, this says a lot about species hierarchies and the way we manipulate animal bodies. It says a lot about the way we distribute wealth, too. On the one hand, we have poverty—massive poverty, human and non-human—and, on the other hand, we’ve got stallion sex planes. It also says a lot about sexuality and how we don’t believe we have sex “with” animals, but we very much do “have sex,” egregiously and gratuitously, alongside animals.

Kraus: Why are you so interested in animals?

Huebert: The call of the non-human, or the inhuman, is, for me, a metonym for fiction. There’s a natural affinity between animals and narrative

in the sense that these are things that elude us. Animals provoke wonder, and I'm particularly interested in the strangeness, weirdness, and doubleness of interacting with animals. You love the dog at your feet or in your bed, yet at the same time there's this massive other world of non-human life that supports industrial human civilization. We'll murder them *en masse*, we'll manipulate their sexualities *en masse*, and yet we think of ourselves as animal lovers.

There's an American philosopher, Gary L. Francione, who talks about this kind of "moral schizophrenia." There are certain species that we adore and certain species that we're willing to throw under the bus. But that's my Ph.D. talking.

Kraus: How did you address these ideas in your dissertation?

Huebert: My dissertation is all about what I call "species panic"—how human-animal love makes us panic and squirm. Looking through the nooks and crannies of post-Darwinian American literature, I found an astonishing amount of human-animal love relationships, but very often that love is also pervaded by panic rooted in Darwin's blow against human superiority and the great chain of being. I particularly studied texts like *Moby-Dick* (1851) and *The Call of the Wild* (1903), which gain much of their force by profound intimate explorations of non-human creatures. We love animals ardently, but there are certain lines we refuse to cross and certain suggestions that make us panic, such as bestiality. I wanted to ask: when is it safe to love animals, and when is it not?

Beyond that, one of the main things I've always been interested in is the way we love animals differently. We love them beyond and outside language, for one. Animals can never say "I love you too," which brings up a whole bunch of thorny questions about consent and dominance. I think part of the attraction of animals is the compelling mystery of their muteness. And I think literature—an art form that is all about emotional speculation—offers a particularly salient exploration of human sentiment about animals.

Kraus: Do you see any connections between your critical and creative work, or do you try to keep them separate?

Huebert: All of my critical work is intrinsically connected to my creative

work, as they energize each other and cross-pollinate in lovely and surprising ways. I couldn't have written my dissertation without writing *Peninsula Sinking* and vice versa. However, they also involve different ways of framing the same ideas as well as different generic conventions. In my creative work, for example, I want to explore all those entanglements and complications at an aesthetic level. I want to let the fiction and poetry be their own organisms, and I want to let the wild inhabit and control my work—to roll, reverberate, and animate the reader.

Kraus: Another thing that struck me about *Peninsula Sinking* was how well you write from a female perspective. In my mind, your women characters are some of the strongest of the collection.

Huebert: Thank you! I've heard that from a few other women I admire, and it really makes me happy. While writing the stories, I realized that the less I wrote about myself the more fun I was having. So, for me, writing women is a way to get beyond myself. Maybe I'm too close to the male experience to write it as well, but when I write women I have to amp up the imagination—to attune it sharply.

I'm very fortunate with the women I have around me. They inspire me in so many different ways. They help me to think of people as people first. When I write female characters I'm usually conjuring—as a baseline, a voice—someone I know, who is close to me.

Kraus: You clearly draw from real life in your stories. Do you do a lot of outside research as well?

Huebert: Definitely. I do a lot of site research, googling, and I like to explore different lexicons and areas of expertise. I know a lot of really good writers who are walking that fine line between fiction and memoir, but I find that the less I maintain fidelity to the real the more fun I have—and the more fun the reader has. And then I have to work really hard to polish that fun. For me the point of fiction is not to proffer truth.

Kraus: You've recently written a second poetry collection, which is coming out soon. What is it about?

Huebert: My new book of poetry, *Humanimus*, explores some mutants and monsters as well as some fantasies and fantasias about the deep evolutionary past. It's very different from my first collection, as it's all about humans, animals, machines, and the ways they interact. The book is inspired by cultural theorist Dominic Pettman's concept of the "humanimalchine" or the idea that the human-animal relationship is more of a triangle that intersects with technology because humans are such technological animals. In other words, we're yoked to animals through machines and sort of always have been. This is just one of the themes of the book. A lot of the poems also iterate and play with the notion of the wild.

Kraus: The spring 2015 issue of *The Dalhousie Review* also featured your poem "Wild in Me," which similarly describes how humans lost the ability to perceive the rhythms of nature:

This mouthy mind won't let me hear
The time before this motorroar,
When handsteps whispered soft as rain
(Each murmur hummed and purred in me).

The time before this motorroar:
Each blade of grass a lilting tongue,
Each murmur hummed and purred in me:
Each colour pealed, and death was young.

You seem to draw a distinction here between the pre- and post-industrial periods, as sensations that once permeated the body are now dulled by the "motorroar" of modern life. Were you already trying to work through the triangulation of humans, animals, and machines in this poem?

Huebert: Yes, I certainly was. That poem was written around the time I was first trying to articulate a lot of these ideas. I'd also been reading about the nineteenth-century concept of "racial memory," and I gave myself permission to imagine memories in myself that were much, much older than me. I think in many ways that poem announced for me the thematic connections that would animate *Humanimus*.

Kraus: What do you think is the relationship between the wild, or wildness, and form?

Huebert: Wildness seems like something that has no form. It makes me think of a spontaneous utterance, like a “howl,” but the wild is actually deeply organized and structured. While it might seem like the wildness of writing is the spontaneous overflow of emotions and feelings, I think form perhaps allows a writer to “howl” differently or more intricately.

Kraus: Is that part of your departure from the lyric poem, then, to get that more machinated, technological form?

Huebert: I’m thinking about language itself as techne. Something that I’ve always been really interested in is how language itself is a technology, how it works with technology, and how it also works as a kind of organism. Poetry is all about exploring the organic function of language and its spontaneous capacity to live, breathe, and mean. At the same time, the poet is turning that language into a technology, experimenting with it, and creating certain constraints. So some of the poems work with constraints that allow for a different kind of musing than the poet would speak. I’m making the book sound more formally radical than maybe it is. It’s not a deep-dive, Christian Bök-style formalist project. There are just a lot of constraints in it.

Kraus: Can you give an example of some of the constraints or formal experiments you work with in this collection?

Huebert: One of the formal experiments comes from a chapbook I worked on with the poet Andy Verboom called *Full Mondegreens* (2016). “Mondegreens” are purposeful mishearings, and the idea comes from Sylvia Wright, who coined the term in 1954. As a child listening to the Scottish ballad “The Bonnie Earl o’ Moray,” Wright often misheard “Laid him on the Green” for “Lady Mondegreen.” So she created a whole character and a whole story-world from the mishearing, which she describes as “wandering down a horn into a mondegreen underworld.” Everyone has these mishearings. Imagine a song lyric that you hear wrong. There are some famous examples, like “hold me closer tiny dancer” becomes “hold me closer Tony Danza” or “there’s a bad moon on the rise” becomes “there’s a bathroom on the right.”

In the full mondegreens, we wander down that horn on purpose. We take a poem by, say, Emily Dickinson, and rewrite it based on sonic rhymes, mapping over each syllable. Andy and I also did “In Flanders Fields,” and my version was “Evander’s Wheels.” The process is similar to Sonnet L’Abbé’s “agroculture” poems, although it is less aggro and more echo—I guess you could call it “echoculture.” It’s about hearing something different and new in the texture of the poem, and it turns out that there are a lot of different ways you can do this in relationship to the original poem. You can make it an inspired callback, something that is a bit more aggressive against the original material, or something that wants to revise the original material. Anyway, that’s just one example of a formal experiment in *Humanimus*.

Kraus: That sounds like fun.

Huebert: It is. I find writing poems with formal experiments like that to be very fun, enriching, and surprising. It’s the freedom of constraints.

Kraus: Who are some of your favourite writers?

Huebert: They’re mostly American writers, like George Saunders and Lorie Moore. William Faulkner is also huge for me—he’s everywhere in my work. I particularly love his productive confusion—the perfect marriage of form and content. In terms of writers from around here, I’m a huge fan of Alexander MacLeod. Among the modern poets I admire, I’d cite Karen Solie, Robert Wrigley, and lately Rita Wong. Whitman and Dickinson also burn pretty deep in the wick of me.

Kraus: What else are you working on at the moment?

Huebert: I’m currently working on a top-secret novel about oil, which is a dark and fascinating aesthetic wound for me—gushers gushing out of the world, fires, creeks choked in oil. I’m particularly interested in the vegetal or organic theory of oil origin—its distant animal-vegetal chemical makeup. Oil is actually a really good example of the interaction between animal and technology, as it consists of animal and plant bodies that stew for hundreds of millions of years and are then burned as ghosts in the carbon steel gas chambers of this crumbling world—what an evocative image! Out of the ash

of that idea, a story is struggling up. It's already seen a lot of drastically different drafts, so I'm reluctant to say what it will eventually look like. Writing a novel about oil that is aesthetically illuminating rather than being didactic has proven tough. For a long time I wanted to write a straight-up historical novel, but I've gotten over that. Let's just say there are replicas, and some animals doused in crude, and a lot of looking into old dug wells.

Kraus: You also seem to address the vegetal theory of oil origin in your poem "Picture Seam," which follows this interview. Instead of representing the transformation of lifeless matter into living energy, however, the imagery in this poem seems more apocalyptic. What were you trying to say about this theory, and how is it related to your novel?

Huebert: I write in "Picture Seam" that "the theory is rot." This means both that the theory is about rot—rot becoming life, energy—and that the theory itself is rotten. It's beautiful in its deep time gaze, but it's also part of the larger problem of the technoscientific exploitation of land (ancient oceans) and resources. I guess what I want to illuminate is that burning oil is burning highly condensed ancient bodies and that maybe, if we confronted that more directly, we would see the ghostliness—the eeriness—of our petroculture. I think we need to love oil more—to think of it not as something dirty but rather as a sacred and ancient gift that we take for granted. Other people—like Métis scholar and artist Warren Cariou—have expressed similar ideas in different ways.

The apocalyptic impulse in the poem is just the notion that one day the plants will reclaim the earth. This is something in which I take a strange comfort. I see weeds growing up out of the cracks in parking lots, and it reassures me to know that probably after this great experiment plants will rise and flourish again. To some extent, I suppose I want to sing the song of those future weeds. They are my messiah.

Kraus: What are the challenges for you in switching from poetry to the novel form?

Huebert: Challenge? Try gaping open gangrenous sore. It's fucking hard. I wrote a novel in the past, which will remain in a drawer forever, so I know I can do it, but there is a big difference between writing a novel and writing a

good novel, which is what I'm trying to do now.

I think you have to come to know yourself as a writer in every genre and every project. The challenge is how to approach the day-to-day. With a novel you've got to forget your despair, sit down at your desk, get a draft done, and then go through five thousand more.