

FRIENDS FROM HARSH PLACES

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

Our friendship was built on finding fun in harsh places. The six of us watched spray paint dry in leaky bus shelters, feeling it settle on the rims of our nostrils. We surfed gravel pits. We dared each other through bull pens. All our games were just fights with a couple of rules and handicaps. All our fights were just games with the rules thrown out of smashed windows.

We found freedom by locking teachers out of classrooms, vandalising lessons, and winding up the bigger, scarier, more serious boys.

We tested and toughened each other with harsh jokes and violent pranks. The violence was diluted with laughter and innocuous names, like wedgies, nuggies, and tally-ho.

We could cuddle each other if we called it wrestling, and didn't stand still to do it, and peppered it with punches.

I didn't know, back then, that I would ever like books. In English class, we had to read aloud random extracts, written ages ago, by people we assumed were rich and old. We had no idea why anyone would care about this stuff because we couldn't relate to it. I didn't try because I got a lot of laughs when I read out my assigned sections and added swear words and silly voices. When I got sent out of the classroom, I swaggered through the door, my ego gorging itself on the smirks and cheers of my friends.

Now we're in a booth at the pub. Grownups. Drunk, I've just told them all I'm writing a novel. They have no idea where it came from and didn't realise I was the type. They wish me the best of luck and hope it sells and that. They ask what it's about.

I really want to say it's about something cool that's more like a film than a book, something that will appeal to them. But it's not, so I warn them up front it's a bit arty farty. I mumble hurriedly that it's about a guy learning about wildlife as a metaphor for understanding masculinity and grief. I don't tell them that the guy is me. I say, "I know it sounds boring," in the hope that they won't say so themselves.

I see every muscle in their faces fighting the urge to call me a wimp. They manage to hold it in; true working-class stoics trained to bottle feelings. They muster thumbs ups with their big, calloused hands and respectful nods of their scarred heads. They know it's important to me. They know I've just offered them my vulnerability like a pack of crisps torn open for the table. They'd never say it, but we know we all love each other. We know the things that we should support each other with, even if we don't know why they're sacred. But it ends the conversation until someone has to break the silence with an order of drinks.

Pints on other tables break out in cold sweat whilst beermats soak up the bitter-sweet juice of dreams left unspoken.

A plate of radiant chips to share is brought to where we huddle in our booth. Our stories of the fun we found in harsh places joyride around the room on doorway draughts of cigarette smoke. Our voices overpower the famous ones on the jukebox. I make mental notes that my friends might read one day.

Josh Holton grew up on a Cumbrian nature reserve. His debut novel, Fledgling, will be released on 17th September 2026 through Conduit Books. He placed in Spread the Word's Life Writing Prize and the Writers and Artists Working Class Writers' Prize.

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