

LBRIS

We know
books

DANIEL PENNAC

School Blues

Translated from the French by
Sarah Ardizzone

With a Foreword by Quentin Blake



MACLEHOSE PRESS
QUERCUS • LONDON

Contents

Foreword ix

The *Cancré*, or Duncé xii

PART 1

The Dustbin in Djibouti i

PART 2

Becoming 31

PART 3

$Y = There$, or the Present Incarnate 89

PART 4

You're Doing It on Purpose 157

PART 5

Maximilien, or the Ideal Culprit 181

PART 6

What It Means to Love 217

Translator's Note 261

Glossary 266

Permissions 272

Translator's Acknowledgements 274

LBRIS

We know
books

I

The Dustbin in Djibouti

*What can be explained statistically
is complicated personally*

I

Let us begin with the epilogue: my mother, nearly a hundred now, watching a film about an author she knows well. We see this author at home in Paris, surrounded by his books, in his library, which is also his study. Its window opens on to a school playground. Recreational rowdiness. We learn that he worked as a teacher for a quarter of a century, and that if he chose this apartment overlooking two school-yards, he did so in the spirit of a railwayman retiring above a marshalling yard. Next we see the author in Spain, in Italy, in conversation with his translators, joking with friends in Venice, walking in the Vercors, a solitary figure at misty altitudes, talking about his craft, about language, style, structure, characterization . . . Another study, this time its window giving on to alpine splendour. These scenes are punctuated by interviews with artists the author admires, and who in turn talk about their own work: the film-maker and novelist Dai Sijie, the cartoonist Sempé, the singer Thomas Fersen, the painter Jürg Kreienbühl.

Back to Paris: the author at his computer, among his dictionaries.

He's passionate about them, he says. We even find out – here the film ends – that he is himself a dictionary entry, in *Robert*, under P for Pennac, full surname Pennacchioni, first name Daniel.

My mother watches this film together with my brother Bernard, who recorded it for her. She watches from start to finish, quite still in her armchair, eyes fixed on the screen, not a squeak out of her, in the failing light.

The film ends.

The credits roll.

Silence.

Then, turning slowly to Bernard, she asks: "D'you think he'll ever come good?"

2

She's never really got over the fact that I was a bad student. Today, as her aged consciousness abandons the beaches of the present and ebbs gently back to the distant archipelagos of memory, the first reefs she encounters remind her of the worry that consumed her throughout my school years.

Resting her concerned gaze on me, slowly: "What is it that you *do*, exactly?"

From early on, my future appeared so compromised that she could never feel entirely confident about my present. Not destined to *become* anything, I wasn't equipped to survive as far as she was concerned. I was her precarious child. And yet, from September 1969, when I entered my first classroom as a teacher, she knew I was able to stand on my own two feet. In the decades that followed, however (meaning my entire adult life), she secretly resisted all "evidence of my success" as attested to by telephone calls, letters, visits, the publication of my books, newspapers articles, even appearances on Pivot. Not the stability of my professional life, not the recognition my writing received, not even things she heard about me from third parties or read in the press could fully reassure her. Yes, she was thrilled by my successes; she discussed them with her friends, agreeing that my father, who had died before knowing about them, would have been pleased, but in the hiding place of her heart dwelt the anxiety spawned by the bad student I'd been. This was how her love for me expressed itself. When I teased her about the delights of maternal concern, she would always retaliate neatly with a Woody Allen joke: "What do you expect? Not all Jewish women are mothers, but all mothers are Jewish!"

Today, no longer fully present, my old Jewish mother betrays that same concern as her eyes come to rest on her sixty-year-old last-born. A concern that may have lost some of its intensity, a fossilized concern reduced to a habit, but one that remains sufficiently resilient for her

to ask, her hand on mine, as I'm getting ready to go, "Have you got somewhere to live, in Paris?"

3

So, I was a bad student. Every evening, I would head home with school snapping at my heels. My reports testified to my schoolmasters' disapproval. When I wasn't bottom of the class, I was second to last. (Champagne all round!) At first unreceptive to arithmetic, then to mathematics, suffering from severe spelling difficulties, rebellious when it came to memorizing dates and places, incapable of learning foreign languages, and with a reputation for laziness (lessons not learned, homework not done), I brought home pitiful results unredeemed by music, or sport, or indeed any extra-curricular activity.

"Do you understand? Can't you *understand* what I'm trying to explain to you?"

No, I didn't understand. And this failure to understand stretched so far back into my childhood that my family had dreamt up a creation myth for it: my learning the alphabet. I never stopped hearing about how it had taken me an entire year to learn the letter *A*. The letter *A*, in a year. The desert of my ignorance began to form even before I encountered insurmountable *B*.

"Don't panic, twenty-six years from now he'll be able to recite his alphabet perfectly."

Such was my father's wry humour, intended to distract from his own fears. Many years later, when I was retaking my final year at school in pursuit of the *baccalauréat* that obstinately eluded me, he would offer the following: "Don't worry, even sitting the *bac* becomes second nature in the end."

Or, in September 1968, when at last I had my degree in French Language and Literature under my belt: "You needed a revolution to get your degree; should we expect a world war when you sit your teacher's exams?"

This wasn't meant nastily. It was our way of bonding. From very early on, we chose to put a brave face on things, my father and I.

But let's go back to my beginnings. The last born of four brothers, I was a case apart. My parents hadn't got in any practice with my siblings, whose schooling, if not exceptionally brilliant, had panned out smoothly.

I was an object of amazement, and continual amazement at that, as the years rolled by without any signs of improvement to my educational torpor. "I'm flabbergasted!" and "Well, I'll be damned!" are phrases I associate with adults staring at me in total disbelief, as they registered my failure to get my head round anything at all.

Everyone else understood things more quickly than I did, or so it seemed.

"You're thick as two planks!"

One afternoon during my *bac* year (one of my *bac* years), my father was giving me a trigonometry lesson in the room we used as our library, our dog slyly asleep on the bed behind us. Once spotted, he was curtly dispatched: "Out, dog, off you go to your chair!"

Five minutes later, the dog was back on the bed, having carefully retrieved the old blanket that covered his chair and brought it into the library to lie down on. Applause, of course, and deservedly so: for an animal to make the connection between something forbidden and the abstract notion of cleanliness, reaching the conclusion that he had to make his own bed in order to enjoy the company of his masters – hats off, this was clearly an authentic act of *reasoning*. The lesson I took from this incident was that even our pet dog caught on more quickly than I did. I seem to remember whispering in his ear: "Your turn to go to school tomorrow, arse-licker."

4

Two men of a certain age are walking by the river Loup, the river of their childhood. Two brothers. My brother Bernard and I. Half a century ago, they used to dive into this transparency. They swam among chubs who remained unperturbed by this disturbance of the peace. The

familiarity of the fish implying that such happiness would last forever. The river flowed between cliffs. As the brothers followed it to the sea, now carried along by the current, now clambering over rocks, they would sometimes lose sight of each other. To find one another again, they learned to whistle. Endless chirrings echoed off the rock faces.

Today, the water level has dropped, the fish have disappeared, a stagnant slimy froth signals the victory of laundry detergent over nature. All that remains from our childhood is the song of the cicadas and the resinous heat of the sun. Oh, and we can still whistle; we've never been out of hearing range of one another.

I tell Bernard I'm thinking of writing a book about school, not about how school has changed as society has changed, as this river has changed, but about what never changes at the heart of such perpetual disruption, about the kind of permanence I never hear being discussed: *the shared pain of dunces, parents and teachers*, the relationships between those afflicted by school blues.

"That's a huge subject . . . How will you approach it?"

"By grilling you, for example. What do you remember about how rubbish I was at, say . . . maths?"

Bernard was the only family member able to help me with my schoolwork without my clamming up. We shared a bedroom until I was sent away to boarding school at the age of twelve.

"Maths? Well, it all began with arithmetic. One day, I asked you

what you were meant to be doing with a fraction you were staring at. 'I've got to find the common denominator,' was your knee-jerk reply. There was only one fraction, so only one denominator, but you stuck to your guns: 'I've got to find the common denominator.' I pressed you further: 'Think about it, Daniel, there's *only one* fraction, so there's *only one* denominator.' You lost your temper: 'But that's what the teacher said: *Always reduce fractions to their common denominator!*'"

And for the rest of their walk, the two men can't stop smiling. That's all in the past now. One has been a teacher for twenty-five years: two thousand five hundred students, give or take, some with "severe learning difficulties", as the expression goes. And both are fathers. So they know all about "That's what the teacher said . . ." Yes, the dunce's trust in the litany. His teacher's words are the floating branches to which the bad student clings in a river whose current is dragging him towards a waterfall. He repeats what the teacher said. Not for it to mean anything or for the rule to make sense, no, just to get out of a tight spot, albeit briefly, to be "left alone". Or to feel loved. At any price.

" . . ."

"So, another book about school? You don't think there are enough of them already?"

"Not about school. Everybody is ready to wade in when it comes to school: the eternal quarrel between Ancients and Moderns, about the curriculum, its social role, its aims, about school past and future.

No, I'm planning a book about dunces. About the pain of incomprehension and the damage it can do."

"Was it really so difficult for you?"

" . . ."

" . . ."

"Tell me more about the dunce I used to be."

"You were always complaining that you couldn't remember anything. The stuff I made you learn vanished into thin air. The next morning, you'd forgotten everything."

That's how it was. In today's youth-speak, I didn't get it. It wouldn't go in and I didn't get it. The simplest words lost their substance as soon as I was asked to learn them. If I had to revise the region of the Jura for homework, for example (more than an example, a memory in fact), then that tiny two-syllable word *Jura* would immediately discombobulate until it no longer had any connection with Franche-Comté, the Ain, clock-making, vineyards, pipes, high altitude, cows, harsh winters, the border with Switzerland or the Alps, or in fact with mountains at all. It ceased to have any meaning. "Jura," I'd repeat to myself, "Jura?" "Jura" – I'd keep saying it over and over again, as indefatigably as a child who won't stop chewing, chewing but not swallowing, repeating but not taking anything in, until taste and meaning are completely reduced to mush, chewing, repeating, Jura, Jura, jura, jura, juw, rah, juw, ra, ju, ra, jurajurajura, until the word becomes an undefined lump without