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Poems by doctors

Brief reflection on laughter

Miroslav Holub

In laughter we stretch the mouth from ear to ear,
or at least in that direction,
we bare our teeth and in that way reveal
long-past stages in evolution
when laughter still was an expression of
triumph over a slain neighbour.

We expel our breath right up from the throat,
according to need we gently vibrate our
vocal chords, if necessary we also touch our foreheads
or the back of our heads, or we rub our hands or slap
our thighs, and in that way reveal long-past stages
when victory also presupposed
fleetness of foot.

Generally speaking, we laugh when we feel like laughing.

In special instances we laugh
when we don't feel like laughing at all,
we laugh because laughter is prescribed or
we laugh because it isn't prescribed.

And so, in effect, we laugh all the time, if only
to conceal the fact that all the time someone
is laughing at us.

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Miroslav Holub (1923–1998) was born in Pilsen, western Bohemia. He studied medicine at Charles University in Prague and trained as an immunologist at the Microbiological Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Science. He was a successful scientist but is best known for his poetry. His recognition followed the publication in 1967 of *Selected Poems* as part of Penguin's series on modern European poets. His poetry was proscribed in Czechoslovakia between 1970 and 1980.

Researched by Femi Oyeboode.

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