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SONG OF THE DRUNKEN MAN

There’s nothing you can say to a man who drinks. He rises in the grey mist of morning and lights his cigarette, knowing that soon he’ll be elsewhere. Out in the world the old men sweep their shops and the barber nods. The full-breasted woman airing her pillows, she smiles and squints—seeing it is only him, she closes her window. But it doesn’t matter. There’s no way of hurting a man who drinks. His wife floats in his pocket. His father twists open the cap. His mother whispers Drink, drink. He moves on down the street.

There are times you feel obligated to speak to a drunk. Taking your hands from your pockets, you slide your glass away from him. In earnest you say something—anything, the weather . . . your son—and he’ll argue at you from some place you can’t know because you’re not a drunken man. Perhaps when you stagger home your wife screams to shut up, come to bed like a man. Your face reddens, your shoes drop, you burrow into her flesh.

But a drunk is like a cloud, is like a ship that sinks but never drowns, is like a feather bed. Already it is noon. His mother and his father are half gone. He’s weightless now. Don’t waste your pity on a drunken man. There are too many of him. At night in the bar you are his weakness, his hope and his family. If you argue back, if you armwrestle him, if the bartender is embarrassed by your antics, it’s time to go home. Go home. Go home to your noisy wife.

Steve Orlen