

[NOT A PAGE]

HOW TO WRITE A POEM

*Accompanied by Alluring
& Instructive Examples
Relating to the Subject*

ARGUMENTA AD IGNORANTIAM

MMXVII

*“ Prepare by gorging
on six or eight thousand
poets, Ai to Zukofsky.*

*Use 3 x 5 cards
for tracking
the good ones.*

*One or two
will likely do.*

*Remember,
there’s poetry
on restroom walls,
on buses.*

*So read
everything
you can.*

*Then can
everything
you've read.*

Bad influence.

*How will you ever
discover your voice
unless you murder
your tutors? ”*

How to **Write**

PUBLISHER'S LOGO



POEM

& OTHER SQUIBS OF LIKE MIND

BRUCE SAGER

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ALSO BY BRUCE SAGER

THE INDULGENCE OF ICARUS
FAMOUS
THE PUMPING STATION
NINE NINETY-FIVE

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PART ONE

AN AMUSING INSTRUCTION

i. Prologue: pay your dues

Prepare by gorging on six or eight thousand poets, Ai to Zukofsky. Use 3 x 5 cards for tracking the good ones. One or two will likely do. Remember, there's poetry on restroom walls, on buses. So read everything you can. Then can everything you've read. Bad influence.

How will you ever
discover your voice
unless you murder
your tutors?

Keep a long knife by your side while
you read, and also a feather pillow:
now you are ready for rage or boredom.
Trust me sweetie, one pillow might not
be enough. Late or soon you'll start
to trumpet one poet, expose another;
you'll learn the taste of the tongue,
learn to cry fraud, to entomb whole
shelves, you'll learn to feed the fire.
You'll learn which mushrooms are poison.

But once you begin to toss Big Names
like so many spent matches
from the steeple,
it's time to try
the steeple
yourself.

Don't worry, it's nothing
like the streets of Fallujah.

Fewer concrete
diminishments.
More abstractions.

So fill your canteen with wine,
it seems to be the thing to do.
Wine or whiskey or snort
water's not worth too much up there.

It will also help to keep a bin in your cellar,
if you can't bear to burn them, simply
to jail your first thousand poems.

Should you ever be dragged into Poetry Court
to find these adduced as evidence,
you must blink at them
as though they are drizzled in neon

and swear you recognize not a one, not
a thing, you've never been there, tell
them you've spent the last twenty years
plotting the rise of reality TV.

Unveil your couch potato's gut.

Provisions laid in, you may begin:

*ii. The meat of the thing:
a so-so how-to manual
that elaborates
on the poetic process
and discloses
for all the world and sundry
how to write a poem
that slant rhymes
“imagines” with “bananas” **

* for which minor delight
you must wade through the entirety

Start by standing on someone's shoulders.
Maybe a writer, maybe not; could be a director,
a movie director. That's where I'd begin.
So pick a film at random. Cue it up. Go to Menu.

Now search for Deleted Scenes, useless snips
of cinematic trash. Hit Play.

What do you make
of this first one? . . . other than the obvious,
that the soundtrack's off, the color uncorrected,
that it's something like a drunkard
by which I mean, it's not as funny
as it thinks it is.

It's nothing. Just a notion.

(And remember, it's
a Deleted Scene.

Its father does not love it.)

Well, *stand that notion on its head.*

Sharpen your pencil
while ruminating

on what a notion
might look like

with all the blood
running to its bald

spot.

Now write: “Ignore the film. Just watch the deleted scenes.” That’s the ticket.

And so it begins. The long slide
down the rabbit hole,
the first step on the yellow brick road.
You’re a real writer now.

Ignore the film. Just watch the deleted scenes.

It’s like handing a starter’s pistol
to a man in a checkered sport coat.

But where to go from here,
whence no yellow bricks spiral off
to some great but distant city?

Look, I never told you this would be easy.

Here's where the might and majesty
of the language will step in, married
in the near night under your little
gooseneck writer's lamp. Or maybe
not. Maybe the might and majesty
of the language are currently in
the employ of some other poet,
likewise desperate to turn a bright sheet
of foolscap into something deathless
and deep, and despair begins to set in.

Turn your back to it, sugar booger.

Think of something else, something to spin
like a beehive of cotton candy from
Ignore the film. Just watch the deleted scenes.
Maybe something that rhymes. Blue jeans.
Depleted means. Smithereens. Jelly beans.

Fine, maybe rhyme isn't
what the doctor ordered.

Not at this point.

So save it for the end,
that elegant whimper,

perhaps a runcible slant rhyme couplet
where a little might and majesty could creep in
and make themselves useful, the exquisite
slumming, isolate and droll.

Or maybe your exit
should be more subtle still,
like the side door of a mansion.
The trap door of a stage.

Maybe your denouement
will be cockeyed,

draped in deception,

fringed with flame.

Maybe it will be about fairies or food or flood,
some bizarre mash up of commonplace fluff
designed to make us do a double take.

Who knows?

How can you know
 what you're going to eat
 until you get your hands on the menu?
 Until you've begun to pair the fish
 with the wine? Perspiration
 may begin with a single word.

Well, I meant *Inspiration*.
 Of course. That's why God
 made the backspace key. But
 this is a poem about process.

So pull down
 your prayer book, your dictionary
 the church
 of the alphabet.

Meanwhile, look out your window.
It's raining. Rain. Rain. *Rain*

is to the writer . . . as . . .

oil . . .

is . . . to . . . the . . .

racecar!

The rain is coming fast and hard,
but you can never distil
so much as a drop
from its descent,

and so we are given
only a corpse
against the glass

or shattered
upon the sidewalk.

The expended raindrop.

The raindrop that contains
its oceans of woe,
the lone man standing in darkness
at the end of a pier,
the lipstick on the mirror,
the little trickle of blood
from an ear.

The expended raindrop.

There might be something to that,
reeking as it does of rack and ruin.

Wracke & ruine. There might
be something to that.
But maybe not.

Alright,
let's revisit the racecar thing;
it wasn't entirely bad:

Rain is to the writer as oil is to the racecar.

Now there's a morning's work.
You should feel proud.
You should sit back
and ponder.

And look how hard you've been
working. Does the laborer not pause
under the midday sun for a sip of water?
The soldier beguile the hours of bivouac
rolling coffin nails? Who are you
to deny yourself the common comforts
the body demands? And besides,
maybe you have your poem
already.

Maybe it goes:

Title:

Like Oil to the Racecar

Body:

Ignore the film.

Just watch the deleted scenes.

The wracke and ruine.

Perhaps somewhere far from here and now
your wondrous formulation will fall
into the hands of a beautiful woman.
Or a student. A beautiful woman student.

A beautiful woman student.

She will think of a film she saw once,
a film where some soldiers were rolling
cigarettes on the eve of battle. She will
recall the luminous eyes of the young
one, gorgeous even in black and white,
the one who will die in the next reel
with so many unsmoked cigarettes
in his future. God, his eyes were
beautiful, she thinks to herself, and
her engine revs, she is sleek and ready
to roll, like a racecar, and her body
begins to oil itself. And the rain
is beating against her patio door.

And she doesn't know that the rain
is of such import, greasing the skids
that got her here: a mystical moment
that no one will ever acknowledge or
even consider — no one, perhaps,

except the poet, who
(while all of this action is going down)
will lean into his keyboard
as if into a great wind

nibbling at a sandwich
of peanut butter and bananas
while he pictures a beautiful

are you ready? —

woman student . . . a woman he imagines
nibbling peanut butter and bananas.