

PART TWO

EXEMPLARY SPECIMENS

Poetry lesson

I am teaching Catie
how to express herself
in various writing styles.

I've explained that styles
are like clothing:
what works one day
might not work the next.

This morning I taught her
about poetry. Then
she taught me.

She taught me how a lamb
is just a cloud with legs.

The spaces between the keys

There's no joy between S and D.
Down there in the trenches
whole lives bloom and wither
beneath our fingertips.

It's nothing like the moats of stillness
surrounding the notes in a score,
it's nothing so profound
though there is, at times,
the promise of some action
with V and B squatting at the gates.

A plaything links T and Y.
Camelot shines through J and K.
Hard to see between F and G,
fog, fag, it all spells smoke, and
jail time in the small dark aisle
connecting avenues K and L.

Sandwiched between
the 5 and the 6 lives one last
little piggy, the porker that no
one ever remembers to count,
too wise to leave home
just happy to be on top, often
lunching with me these days,
content with a few crumbs,
talking big, talking percentages,
exposing, as I sit and eat,
an attitude about this world
skewed slightly to the left.

Oh, and who's that now
staring up at me as though
I were the face in the heavens,
what centrist agape
amidst the Y and the U?

What it is like

Here is a little poem
set amidst its raucous
brothers and sisters.

If you turn the page
too fast, you might
miss it.

When the other poems
raise their hands
it says nothing.

When they howl
for food it is silent.

When they bray
about paying
their taxes
it looks down
at its laces.

It is like
the frog by our
quiet pond. Glistening,
bright as a crayon.
Still as a rock.

Have I ever longed
with such precision?

Fruit of my eye

I think of an apple.

I type the word, *apple*,
and it appears in letters
on a screen, on a page.

So what we have up there
is a clutch of five letters
set in twelve point
Didot Italic, lower case.

This is not an apple.

But your eyes
see the letters,
your mind
goes to work, and
late or soon *ta da!*,
the letters form a picture,
an image, made
just for you
by, partly, you
and, partly, me.

Make no mistake, sugar,
we need, always,
to surprise each other.

As for the image,
the details, it could be
a crisp green Granny Smith
with, close to the top,
two small brown holes

or a heavy drop
of red, red sin

or a buttery moon
set atop a basket,
lording it over
the kiwi and pears

(that's your say)

but still: an apple

(that's mine).

That's my small privilege,
my show of arms, the art
of the conjurer. For
example: now
I am typing
the word
sea.

Like oil to the racecar

after Frank O'Hara

Ignore the film.
Just watch the deleted scenes.
The wracke and ruine.

And this sandwich
is delicious, smacking as it does
of orange.

Writer's block

Nothing seems able to breach
the living fortress of this turd.

Four days of good medicine
and bad diet have brought
us to this turn. Four days
it flourished and sang in my
bowels and now, two days
and more, it lives in the piping
just beyond the fixed throat
of my toilet. Time has done
nothing to soften it. Water
has done nothing to soften it.
It flaps like the stone wing
of a gryphon, languishing
there, flushing the still waters.

It is as though the black log
of my intransigence
has found its way
into this world.

Directly, pumpkin

I want to talk with you directly.
Directly, pumpkin.

Not as in *right now*,
in the next moment, but as in
just you and me, kiddo. Directly.

One on one. Eye to eye.

I don't know why.
I don't have much to say.
I don't want to be famous.

It's just this persistent inkling,
sugar that we're living the same life.
That angels sometimes shit on our shoulders
and mutter into our ears. That we invent
our angels. That the glove's been thrown
that life and art are at war. Always war.
That sometimes, like the caterpillar,
we lurch into beauty.

So welcome to the main event:

In this corner, weighing in
at one thousand pounds,
fleeting hours, fizzling conjugalities,
unspeakable labors, mewling kids,
sobbing parents, cravings, satieties,
a dying corgi, friends metaled
and spurred, the mass
and majolica of this world, a few
extra pounds, an honest mirror.

And in *this* corner, weighing in also
at one thousand pounds,
a few scraps of paper
harried with words. It's what
we do. That's it, my sweet:
some lines no more than twenty,
fifty, a hundred people tops,
are like to read. Settled thus,
the better angels of our being.

But here's the thing: the angels
are throwing down. Always
you hope it will come to this.

You set aside the turkey
you're stuffing and turn off
the phone. Rebutton the jeans
you'd just loosened. You settle
down ringside. And oh,
to lounge ringside at such an event!

The world's most expensive tickets,
for which you've paid
precisely face value, which is
nothing. Nothing but the price
you've paid. Ah, what seats.

Oh Jesus, what a ring:
I've spotted a corner
on each of your shoulders.

Angels. Cut men. Trainers.
The whole entourage. Excruciating
weight. Deathless. Dazzling. Darling,

I thought you might like to know
that you're not very different
from Dorothy in this regard,

that you can click your heels
whenever you feel the need,

that you can paint their faces
with the commonplace at any time,
your little dusty troupe,

that you can always toss your mane
and brush them away like horseflies.

You can. But you won't.
Not your way. Not mine.

So I thought you'd like to know
that you're not alone on that stool.

And one thing more you should know.

That all of this can end
with a period.

Sometimes my mistress shows up at poetry readings

So you're probably thinking, right from the first line,
he's kidding, right? I mean, it's 2016. For god's sake,
do people even keep mistresses anymore?
And is that what they call them? It's preposterous.
I mean, he's not really suggesting, the silly bastard,
that there's an actual flesh & blood woman
sitting in this very room, right now, listening
to these very words at this very instant,
at the same time I'm listening to them . . .
but look at how shiftily he is
as he's declaiming this little poem
that's barely a poem, and though he doesn't
look too bright, he does look devious,
so I'm guessing the little jezebel
isn't sitting in the chair next to his
 that would be too obvious
but maybe she is, that would throw us all
off, all of us sitting here very politely
listening to him go on and on about
what I was thinking at first
was an imaginary mistress who shows up

at poetry readings, maybe like the Muse
or something, but now I'm beginning to notice
that people to the right and left of me
are shuffling in their chairs and looking
to the right and left of themselves, and I hear
some rustling behind me as well
as everyone in this room begins to look around
to see if there's a woman in here that nobody recognizes,
because after all poetry's a small community
and we most of us know each other, so if there's
a suspiciously red-faced little strumpet sinking down
into her chair right now, wishing it were quicksand,
then we all want to know it. And we also want to know,
since she probably slid into the bathroom with him
before the reading began, to do god-knows-what,
whether, since he always hits the punch bowl
and the cookies and cheese pretty hard after a reading,
whether they at least washed their hands
before they finally unlocked the door
and slinked back into the crowd
to blend in, so innocently, with the rest of us.

The night that I met Annie

It was just outside
the doors of this
public reading room.

They were the public
and I was the reader.

There was a sign,
it said Free Reading.
What a concept.
Free verse.

She came up to me
and she was shy
and asked if it
were really free.

And I said yes,
yes, I guess it is,
in a sense but
in another, well,
little girl, you
have no idea
how much
it could cost.

I might, she said.
I might have
some idea.
But how about
you? Do you
have an idea
of just how much
it might be worth?

I don't think
she was
twenty yet.

Baby, I said,
who d'ya think
yer talkin' to?

She guessed
that I was
the reader
that night.

She thought
that I was
someone.

When you think words

think bullets. Think Benya Krik. Best not to ignore Alphonse Capone, Vito Andolini Corleone. A Chosen One, the subject standing guard in guttering light firing at a leaf mold, the breaking of a stick. Bless the simple sinew of the verb, the call to action. Spikes.

Call them cockles, cobblestones, cooch or coriander. Call them prayer, predicate, spell. Those, or Revelation. Cast them in terms of Byzantium, Sumer, the Whore of Babylon. You might even try to cast them out for the blight they've grown to be upon your page just see where that gets you. Me? I've made my peace. Now you must make your own.

You must make your own poem and fill it with all the perfume you can dredge from the language. Like a small cup of spermaceti drawn from the head of a whale, these words await you, you must dip into the lexicon and drench yourself in all this beauty

lace your lines with acacia and oleander, the bright tang of frangipani and chamomile, the aroma of jasmine. Your fingers must drip with anise and coriander. Blood cockle, dog cockle, mussel, whelk, your fingers must stink with the furzy cooch of words. When they arrive in force you'll know it. Esteem these ten horns of the Beast, then creature no more their carriage than winged shoe simple sandal. Sit, cleave to whatever you can. If you know sin, join in. Ring with breaking crystal, sing, fly from your tower bowl, bard, bat. Reflect on that.

Reflect on the bosom of words, and how it heaves. Shower the cobblestones below. Reflect on how it is you lean now into the grim chair, the failing light, to learn about the gold cup in my hand, full up with abominations scratched across the face. Gossip, shame, crime, disgrace play, bet, call, trump haruspex, sibyl, magus, enchanter: I said, reflect on the bosom of words. How it heaves. A brace of leaves.

This is the place I'll build my house

It's like coming to the top of a hill,
stopping, and saying okay, this
is the place to build.

Today. Now.

And the wood appears, the nails,
the measuring tools. Almost magic.

But it's not, of course.
It's not magic. Magic is raw, unpeppered.

You've been
prepping for this
for most of your life,
and you build without plans
because you don't need plans:

you've pored over so many already.
And moved through so many good houses
that were clearly built without plans.

The frame, we'll call that diction.
The decoration, that's tone.
The floor, pacing.

The rest is up to you,
whoever you are, stopping by
and standing here
with such fine patience
on this porch.

A nice wrap-around porch, nothing fancy,
just some boards, a couple of rockers.

The Greatest Poem Ever Written

No bells, confetti, archangels joyed its arrival.
The stars were normal that day.
Traffic ran fine.
Nobody stood in a manger.
Nobody stood in a line.

Couplet, quatrain, sestina, sequence . . .
dons have puzzled for eons over its form.
Whenever a scholar waves flags of triumph
hogs run wild from its ruined gardens.

It suffers no rhymes, except by fluke;
but one afternoon when the hogs got loose
a child discovered that each word rhymes.

Like a stand-up comic, it has its little jokes.
Alliteration, metonymy, elision have crept
between its lines like summer weeds.
And simile it's gobbled like a fruit.

Dictated by an after-dinner drunk,
its shire of birth is unremembered.
A secretary took down every note
but the words came fast.
In spots she used her own.

It plays like a radio or a lute,
fast, loose, some say its punctuation
echoes the crack of a bone.

Today we track it like a satellite.
People make careers of it.
We know it's real as a cave in Zion.
We know it's real as a marriage vow.
We know it wakes
to a different mouth each morning.
We know it works in the dawn,
it works in the dark.

At times it seems like nothing,
an offhand remark.

It works for a marriage, a tribe, a nation.
We know it translates easily
to Cyrillic, Chinese, Greek.
But like the moon, or vulgar gestures,
its meanings shift from place to place.

It isn't much of a celebration.
It doesn't dress or take on airs.
It doesn't paint its face.

Zzzzzzz . . .

AVOID:

Moonbeams.

Windsong.

Dally.

Quintessential.

Verdant.

Smegma.

Rhapsodic.

Bunion.

Demonstrative.

Yeatsian.

Irregardless.

Lassitude.

Loverly.
Globalization.
Fornicate.
Obstreperous.

Chatoyant.
Fugacious.
Overacted.
Unctuous.

Propinquity.
Felch.
Exegete.
Cicada.

Cicada¹

BILLY COLLINS, ON POETRY DEAL-BREAKERS:

*The word cicada, for example, stops me
in my tracks. Sorry. I simply cannot continue.*

O' Perfesser, but you must! For the cicada
in its fullness resembles nothing
so much as the established poet
not that *every* poet's ceded the chance
to grow in stealth a sash of lucent wings
to spend the long nights singing like a lush.

Cicadas of our gender, you'll be gladdened to learn,
expose noisemakers called "tymbals"
and the resonance of this term
with the more familiar "symbols"
will not have escaped the attentive reader,
no less than a semblance to "cymbals"
will have evaded the more percussive.

(It's said such racket
often inspires haiku
a form Billy loves.

¹ A wag might here opine that the parenthetical, dithering nature of the cicada's life suggests a correspondence to many a poetic career.

But since he foundered
upon the very first line,
how might we tell him?)

No matter their lives
are lived largely in darkness,
no matter they spend the seasons secluded
brewing their cyclical magic
towards the end (and here the likeness soars)
the cicada will fashion an exit tunnel
to surface, finally, into the brilliant light. *Ta da!*

Well, shucks. Breathe easy. This should be
offending no one, least of all Billy,
for doubtless he's left the building by now,
by Line Thirty-Three, the very cradle
upon which your eyes and not his
were just resting.

So let me confess how very sad I am
that he never got past *Cicada*, our erstwhile Laureate
with those deep and astounding crinkles
around his eyes, bat lines,
speed lines, the tumbrel of life rushing
beyond his temples, lines that my wife
keeps wishing on me.

And while I'm at it, let me admit
how, from time to time, I'll fish
in the clear pools of metaphor
for just a few of his lines, and how
to make a clean breast of it how I'd love
to abandon this doorway of blue hydrangeas
and run right down the center hall
of his former home, long-evoked, comfy
and lived-in, resplendent with books,
piano from *Japan* silent and big,
and this door over here leads to a room
with two chairs and a table,
and on the table two spoons, two knives,
one shaker white (for salt), one black,
and there is a picture, of course, that snarling fish
hanging in its frame by the famous window
that no one ever looks in, just out of, and there,

through that doorway, *shhhh!*, we'll go
on tiptoe, a man recumbent
among open pages, staring at the ceiling
through heavy lids, what hair he has
extended, winged and wild, lifting him
from the couch and lofting him
through the air of his rooms, the huge open
skies of Wordsworth, allowing me
all the time I need
to sneak under the covers
to pick the pockets
of his persona, the great molting voluptuary,
the grinning Guggenheimer, all good and gray
and Irish green, get out, get out
of my poem, he mumbles, there's
only room for one of us here, that
unrepentant goober of a Literary Lion.

The civilization of the tongue

The animal of language.

It has moved inside me for as much time
as I can recall. It was small
when I was small. And grew
a tongue upon my tongue, so that
my tongue, which might have played
crucible to Mandarin or Greek,
just a dumb jibber waiting to learn
the sound of itself, learned, and
what it learned was American English.

And how it bathes in the bell
of the mouth, this tongue, now
cursing its mates, now a porpoise
rolling in a tank, just as civil
as the moment calls for and no
more, it cannot bear restraint
for long, it can bear nothing more
than I can bear, not one iota more.

How the tongue cracks its whip
over the lion of the muscle,
the bright owl of the brain,
there is a whole menagerie
it trumpets and defines:
the stolid mule of the heart,
the insect of the eyelid,
the snake of the sex,
the humble, plated turtle
of the mouth, its hard palate,
its soft platen, its home,
and how it strives to play saint
and philosopher, policeman,
politician, the one who would
civilize that living zoo. The one
who would set out on the tiny legs
of my fingers to conquer
that rapacious monster standing
with one foot in the Abbey
and the other in plain Westminster.

Valéry

so much
depends

on a red
cart

glazed
with rain

beside the
white hens

So what do you do? he asked

For money or love? I replied.
He surprised me: For love.
For love, I said, I write poems.
For love, he said, I shoot birds.

I get up early, I said, for love.
I get up early, he said, for love.
I sit for hours and nothing happens
we each said at the same time.

He looked down into his drink.
I'm sick of shooting birds, he said.
I looked down into my drink.
I hear that, friend, I answered.

How to tell if a poem is real

You know it's real
when the dog
of your body
bays it into your bones;

you know it's real
when the dog runs off
with your ears
its mouth

and each of your hairs
stands up in its pulpit,
praying.

Just a soft prayer
in a simple church

but down come
the pillars
of this world.

When to shut up

My friend Mike is a chef and so it is usually worthwhile to drop in and say What's cooking? One day I drop in and he says This poem is cooking, I've been waiting for you, I want you to take a gander. The poem is full of ginger and lemon verbena, it smacks of fingerroot. If it were a painting it would look like fingers growing from the central stem of a fine piece of glassware sitting in the middle of a marquetry table under the barrel vault of a dining hall in some Alsatian castle. I venture this. Cut the shit, he tells me, I could use a little perspective here, but all the perspective I can conjure is the delicious and terrible collision of lemon and ginger on the rough inland waters of the poem. There is no water in my poem says Michael. I know, I say, and there you have it.