

PART THREE

EIGHT WAYS TO OPEN A POETRY BOOK

An invitation

Brushless,	Let us
penniless,	enjoy
penless,	the world
absent	in its
rank	uniform
or ribbon,	green
let us	and blue,
link arms	exacting fares,
and tarry	punching tickets,
in one	having
another's	missed
fortunes.	us both

Or ill	hunched
fortunes.	down here

Either.	with neither.
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Wearing some egg on his lapel

Were you thinking to run into me here,
 my honey, my doodle, my coney, my coo?
 Well, join the party. Take a hit.

You'll glance around,
 you'll poke about, but odds
 on best you'll suss out
 is a meager suburban smiling man
 pale, squinting, pudding bellied,
 a head too short, all shiny domed

just a man, you know,
 loitering in an unlit corner
 wearing some egg on his lapel
 a political pin?, a fashion statement?
 standing back, far from the action,
 far from the tunes, and, oh yes,
 it's dreadful, I know painfully far
 from the best looking girls
 (I'd guess about thirty years distant
 by now), swirling something in a glass
 and wishing for a better suit.

You think I look familiar? As you.
Sometimes I think we've met before.
So you, my doxy, my dimple, my dove
are you a knowable quantity, too?

Was that you I glimpsed today
arms full of bags in the Wal-Mart lot?
You can tell me. It's time to fess up.
I saw you stop to check your phone
just as the sun dropped from the clouds
to break into breathtaking pieces.

(I don't think that you saw me, though.
I was the man in the madras shorts,
mismatched flip-flops, a wad of chaw,
crumpling an empty can of Coors
against my Orioles baseball cap.)

Was that you blasting by
at Houston & Elm,
I believe it was Friday last?
I'm willing to bet that was you.

You were driving a pretty nice car,
I was driving what poets drive,
it was maybe half past noon.
And you shot me
a look for puttering.

That's what poets do.
We putter.

Putter and stare.

I try to not get called out
for ogling, but what's
the use? Staring's
what I do best.

I can almost see you now
(ample, prosperous / skinny, nervous)
lounging on the sands of a beach,
book in hand, rum by your side,
shading your eyes as only
the sighted must.

You're coiled in the shell of a chaise
that's clasping you
like a lover.

The shell of a chaise,
a whiff of oil,

and the echoes
of oceans
in your head
if and when
you lift these lines
and hold them
to your ears

as children do
with shells they find

so hold them
to the slow-chapt light,
this honey drizzling
from your gorgeous hair.

A stranger at the cabin door

So how can you know,
until you've begun
to paddle this stream,
whether I'm standing here
proud at the helm (picture
the captain of the *Titanic*)

or staggering between decks
a drunk in a tsunami?

Poor page-diddler!
How can you know
who I am? Sailing
is an act of trust.

Of course, you're
not the only pilgrim
working the room, *ma puce*
not even the only one
working on faith.

Case in point:

How can I know
if that's a shotgun
or a happy face
sitting half-cocked
by your cabin door?

I might knock
the whole night through,
but no guarantee
I'll ever be heard
above the rust
of the sea

no way to know
if anyone's even in there,
much less someone
with powders
and gadgets enow

to capture this herd
of hoof-and-finger prints
I've left galumphing
all over the narrow passage
outside your door.

Only a thief
loves an empty cabin.
But every poet
loves a reader with chops.

How much of you
am I, then, we
of each other, queer
for a dirty unburdened
coupling, panties tossed
on the bedpost, work boots
jettisoned by the foot
of the bed, nor craving
the clean break, the clear sail,
but urging each other
to a darkening of the blood
wine dark, of course
a miscegenation.

Sailing is an act of trust.

Perhaps some eggs this morning

I don't know about your cholesterol.
Mine's pretty good.

Good enough at least
to chance two of these organic beauties
over easy, snuggled between four rashers
of bacon, each strip finished perfectly
as a Puccini aria. How the aromas soar
across the stovetop, out the door.

It's shaping up to be a decent day.

I picture myself sitting in the garden
shortly after breakfast
debating with a persistent jay
the merits of a maduro versus
something a little lighter, though
of course I'll end up with the cigar
I really want because, you know, I can outfox
a jaybird any day. All he ever does
is tweet the same objections, again
and again, twittering 'til he's blue in the face.
Hell, maybe I'll smoke two.

And a little later today I can see myself
thumbing lazily through the pages
of a popular magazine, reading all
about the sexy peccadilloes of a girl
or a boy one-third my age, a person
blessed with good hair and a serviceable
voice. I'll be thrilled to learn exactly
what stage of rehab s/he's in.

Maybe I'll be sitting in a waiting room
while all of this excitement's going on,
catching up on the culture, discovering
(in the thin, colorful pages of *People* or *Us*)
that a woman somewhere landed in a canal
because she was on her cell, and that
someone with a very Eighties mullet
was brave enough to fish her out.

I will hum to myself the heart's nobility.
They will be standing together on a dock
like boy and girl, like Adam and Eve, his
arm snaked lightly about her dripping waist,
and she will have bright apple cheeks, and
it will turn out that she was the very nurse
who saved his mom two years before (when
mom was choking on eggplant parmigiana)
in everyone's favorite Italian restaurant.

I will hum to myself the heart's nobility.
But I'll still laugh a little at his haircut.

Perhaps there will be a haircut, in fact,
in the latter part of the afternoon, and
Cal the barber will grunt at me in a way
that I have come at last to understand
is his mode of welcome, for he is old,
even older than I am, and he is grateful
that I have surfaced one time more.
He has his eye on a trip to Hawaii
and I have several thousands of hairs
that he will shorten to get himself there.

But what I want to know is how
in the progress of a day like any other
we're soaring now through star-drenched
ether, swooping wingless over the torches
of autumn, sailing past huts of thatch, by
runnels slurry with cod, making our way,
without so much as a chart, to quarried walls,
forbidding grates and how, with neither
mallet nor pick, we're breaking through
anyway edging along the walls to the keep,
the spiderwebbed heart of the place, inkwells
splattered on stones, letters dimpling the dust,
to gape at the jumbled alphabets piled within.

Admission

*A book is a mirror: if an ape peers in,
it's unlikely an apostle will peer out.*

LICHTENBERG

It's good that this is the sort of matter
transacted in the old-fashioned way
that money once passed hands
from the lush hand of the teller
to the mute hand of the patron,
a break from the roar of the day
in the hush of a great bank's plenum.

Whether a Thursday night or Monday morning,
hopefully you're dipping into this
while you should be doing something else,
reducing a sauce, perhaps. Learning to salsa.
Or snuggled next to a lightly snoring lover.

I like to imagine you at the library
of your kitchen table, coffee cup, cruller
in hand, while the first cardinals of spring
snare the occasion to run the naked boulevards
branching beyond your window.

I like you like that, I'll be
quick to admit it: nature's child
but with a mortgage, not one to cull
the mist from the moonlight,
just the Solid Citizen
who answers notes promptly
and pays bills early,
someone who never forgets
a birthday. Someone who understands
a creeping on tiptoe at midnight,
someone who's done it
a few times herself, someone
from whose pantry one could exact
precisely the right sort of snack
in the darkest hour of the night
without disturbing the children.

I also like you in the shower
soaping yourself distractedly
thinking about something
I set down in here with you in mind.

But perhaps
 you're at your most fetching
 lounging in an outdoor café,
 watching me spout off
 page by page, smiling
 at my blots and silly notions
 while somebody somewhere
 awaits the crunch of your tires.
 He glances at his watch
 every minute or two
 tapping his foot
 with growing impatience.

I love that you'd do that for me.

A book is a mirror, but also a spyglass.
 It cuts both ways, perfume as you will:

we're nothing more than voyeurs,
 showoffs, the twain

just a handful of Tammys
 and Toms, Peeping,
 knickers and drawers
 harried down low
 and hanging out
 for all the world to relish.

Oh my dervish, my dipstick, my dove,
any fool can see that we need each other
much as the flasher needs the flashed

every page a squeaky wheel
rolling against a busted schedule,
every poem a time and place
where planes can drift to sleep
and trains neglect to run.

So we can get together
whenever you want. Words work
by sun, they work by moon.

And here you are now, right on
time, and just in time for nothing
much, lurking with the moon
in the grass, peering through
my window, over my bald spot.

Sometimes I see you shaking your head,
watching me stitching scratching
the stillborn, the badly botched.
But sometimes I see you smile.
Perhaps I should put on a better shirt
and pour us a good rusty scotch.
With any luck you'll be here for a while.

Busting Omertà

*Omertà, the Code of Silence –
from umiltà: humility.*

Damn the Godfathers One, Two and Three
in marathon any excuse not to peck
at these keys damn this dish of coated
almonds, these cabinets of Cokes and cakes
and chocolate pretzels. Damn all
this coffee. Damn putting this book
to bed. Soon either it or I
will sleep with the fishes.

Now it's somewhere close to five,
and the world's begun to rise
like a steaming horse, but I'm flailing
still think a muted Vito
sagging among his vines saddled with
these *ficciones*, struggling to spill
whatever beans yet line my pockets
into a few clever rows. Perhaps
one day you'll be amused
for a second. Somewhere
you are sleeping the sleep
of the good.

Not me. No codes of silence here. Just
cockles, cobblestones, cooch and coriander.
The poet's standard tool chest.

And yet, lurching through the tomato patch
of my rooms badass mofo scribbler
compelling respect I detect a trembling
of the tchotchkes and plates. The clock
weights sink in terror. Oh honey, nothing
but nothing looks me in the eye, not even
the spotted cloisonné, not the expensive oils,
not even the yellow gardenias turn their heads
as I lumber darkly towards the powder room.

Behold the sullen cloudburst of command!
O sexy thing!

As the sun comes up
the window panes go faint
with desire, and a corner of the carpet
is faint with stain: the red Zin we killed
last weekend with Mike and Cheryl.

But now, alas, the figure's begun to limp
(conceit: always rotten at the roots)
and I'm reduced to something mere:
a placid writer casting himself
in terms of an action figure,
a man of bold emprise. How silly.

Yet how lucky I am, how thankful
to be pitching through these rooms
where not even a knee could be skinned,
where I can plot without suspicion,
where there is music and art
for the thieving, shelves of books
threatening, at worst, a paper cut,

where soon I'll drop
to bloodless dreams
and wake to late, delicious lunch
and piles of proofs, honest
work in a real world
that somehow, inexplicably
no gun to the temple, no horse
in the sheets pays. At least a little.

Its nature

It is fragile.

It can be lost to wine
or an untimely guest.

It can founder
in the looking glass.

It can drown
in the sea of itself,
in the swamp
of its own pits.

It can start well
yet go astray.

It can
end well
yet never
be read.

The poem
is finished
when you
turn away.

**Pianny roll blues,
I danced holes in my shoes**

*and for these bounties,
these wry thanks:
reductio, renovatio*

ME

I would like to thank
no one. Nobody helped.
I am here today because of
me. Of my own accord,
a nation of one, of the people,
by the people, and by God
for the bloody people
of that small island
that no man is.

I would like to thank The Academy
but I never heard from them.
I would like to thank My Parents
but they never heard from me
and now it's a little late: I'm not sure
they would even recognize my voice.

I would like also
to thank the mayor (me)
and the governor (me) and the
squidgy little pasha sitting
up there on the hill whom
in my capacity as chief dispenser
of names I now name Emperor
of the Hill. Which would be
myself and no other. There warn't
another other way to be.

Is this the place where I acknowledge
my editor and my proofreader?
All mistakes are theirs and theirs alone.
I would like to thank God
that I am an agnostic.
And if you have a problem with that,
then go petition the District Judge.

Go see who's sitting on that bench.

PART FOUR

THE UGLY TRUTH & OVER & OUT

The last poem I'll ever write

I suspect it might be rolling
 somewhere off the watery horizons
 of Polynesia, normally a stretch
 for an East Coaster like me,
 but not so very far this morning,
 sitting as I am in a Maui backyard
 over the remains of eggs and juice and toast
 with the coffee table of the Pacific
 spread open before me.

And, thinking about it — pressing my finger
 over a final few crumbs,
 lifting them from my plate
 perhaps that poem
 is farther out still. From
 the shade of this lanai
 I imagine it cresting
 beyond the curve of the earth.

I fancy it feeding
 on whatever swims out there, fishes
 like small words building to
 an elegy or an epithalamium
 in the silvery plenum of its belly.
 I can feel it. I know it's there.

The other thing I know is that this yard,
this splendid instance in space,
home to spotted dove and cattle egret,
is subject to a celestial egg timer,
ours for just three days, no more,
one Friday one Saturday one Sunday
left to enjoy this little Kihei bungalow
which backs onto a moment
of startling green declining
into the hourglass blues
of the unmade sea.

Well, soon enough this will be over.
You've been on vacation.
You know the drill.

Soon enough I will be sitting
on the tarmac, sitting
in the narrow belly of an airplane
scrunched between my drowsing wife
and an unopposably large man
with blighting breath, and I will crane
to assess the calves of the stewardesses
pushing sodas and ice
down the long aisles of their careers.

My ambitions will be no larger
than snacks perhaps an extra
bag of peanuts, if I ask
in a soft hungry voice.

At which point I'll be deep in pine
for the Pacific breeze and the birds
and the painterly grasses.

I will recall
as though it were just hours ago
how the lawn gave itself over without reserve
to a casual strip of shifting sand
and (if memory serves) to these
several shameless postcard palms
which interpose themselves
like island girls
between my borrowed porch
and the appalling power and beauty
of the breaking waters.

Perhaps by then
I will have flown over the last poem
without my even knowing it, the way
we fly past the anniversaries of our own deaths
each year. Calm. Resigned. Oblivious.

The end

This is the way it will end,
the sun will go out. If ice
can shiver, it will shiver.

This is the way it will end,
alone, and a few people
will care, and it won't matter,
your body will become
a hand of solitaire

even with your children
at your feet, even with
your red-eyed wife
clinging to your hands
like two balloons.

This is the way it will end,
the book will be closed
and the words forgotten.

BRUCE SAGER lives in
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and serves as CEO
of a technology firm
that supports the U.S.
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Being the rarest of
rarae aves

in such an instinctively
conservative society
a political & social liberal
keeps him on his toes.

His prior career
was in typographic design.

