

Empty Bottle

An empty bottle was my home. I liked to pretend I was one of those toy ships that's too big to be in there, hoping people would ask what they ask about those ships: "How did that get it in there? How would I get it out?" I was waiting for those exact words, at least the last set. How would I get it out? The person who peeked in my bottle and said something like that, something other than, "Nah, only swill down there now," or "Not even recyclable."—that person was my savior, more so than Christ, more so than myself, more so than they ever wanted to be and I say that with certainty.

Several decades earlier, having knocked over a sofa shop (I swear to God to get a sofa and not for the money, which we eventually hid in it), my partner Dan Zing and me found ourselves accidentally wealthy. We made an unexpected connection with a man who hustled sofas. His name was Shell Oil. I'm not kidding. He called himself "The Sultan" and told anyone who asked about his birth name to check the stock page and multiply by 400,000.

I never argued with him once about anything. We saw to eye to eye like twin brothers united against a common foe. I would have called him a role model if I hadn't been him already, and to absolute perfection. I'd taken his act as far as it could go. I'd squeezed every last drop from any scam in his vocabulary. I know when the friendship is horseshit. I smell it a mile away, cowboy.

Shelly said, "It's all smooth like." He demonstrates by sighting down his cue stick like a rifle. Never use instruments of violence in metaphors ostensibly promoting peace, Shelly.

Shelly said, “No shit, what does that mean? Really. You smart, ain’t’cha? I’m not sure though.” He eyes me up and down like a window to wipe. It’s just you broke the standard form for the pitch, Shelly. I explain that after you demonstrate to the mark that you know you have his trust and you appreciate it enough to show him, then you stand stock still, no gestures, especially not inadvertent subconscious violence. I let him know because I forgive him, I lead him to believe.

Then Shelly stands up and lets out a big sigh. It’s like he wants to make the shot easy by exposing his full chest. I swear I saw him surrender to it because he knew his time was up. I mean he knew it. Would you?

Now I never would have done it excepting he meant to do it first. Having the gun behind him made it harder in this case. I think I could beat him under any circumstances and these were stacked against him.

The last thing he saw was a bottle, an empty bottle of beer standing on the bar like a desert cactus. He looked into that bottle from twenty feet away, but saw every original granule of sand in the overall weave. He saw all the secrets of color and the color of air burst before him, inviting him in.

I’ve had time to consider it. I’ve had time to populate this place with every manner of being, and I’m proudest of the poets because they were really the least likely when you think of my beginnings. Yet they are here too. They often sing me a cast of still more selves to call neighbors.

The last one explained, after ringing my doorbell wearing a white filter over his tangled beard, that no one is going to be new anymore, that life in the empty bottle is a magical punishment from a keeper kind enough to stop me in my foolishness. He would like me to trust him and asks me to very frankly.

I say, “How did you move me into this bottle in the first place?” I ask with so many intertwined reasons and angles of interest.

Keeper says, “Wait for the one who can free you. Only waiting openly permits the appearance of that one, so wait openly. Wait and wait. Are you waiting? Are you waiting? You must always ask.”

I have forgotten why so I tell these stories. I am waiting. I am not in the bottle and somehow I am still waiting after leaving it.