

"A triumph—heartbreaking and heart-healing."
—Matt Haig, author of *The Midnight Library*

Excerpt

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*A Tale for the Time
Being*

The Book of Form and Emptiness

A Novel

IN THE BEGINNING

A book must start somewhere. One brave letter must volunteer to go first, laying itself on the line in an act of faith, from which a word takes heart and follows, drawing a sentence into its wake. From there, a paragraph amasses, and soon a page, and the book is on its way, finding a voice, calling itself into being.

A book must start somewhere, and this one starts here.

A BOY

Shhh . . . Listen!

That's my Book, and it's talking to you. Can you hear it?

It's okay if you can't, though. It's not your fault. Things speak all the time, but if your ears aren't attuned, you have to learn to listen.

You can start by using your eyes because eyes are easy. Look at all the things around you. What do you see? A book, obviously, and obviously the book is speaking to you, so try something more challenging. The chair you're sitting on. The pencil in your pocket. The sneaker on your foot. Still can't hear? Then get down on your knees and put your head to the seat, or take off your shoe and hold it to your ear—no wait, if there are people around they'll think you are mad, so try it with the pencil first. Pencils have stories inside them, and they're safe as long as you don't stick the point in your ear. Just hold it next to your head and listen. Can you hear the wood whisper? The ghost of the pine? The mutter of lead?

Sometimes it's more than one voice. Sometimes it's a whole chorus of voices rising from a single thing, especially if it's a Made thing with lots of different makers, but don't be scared. I think it depends on the kind of day they were having back in Guangdong or Laos or wherever, and if it was a good day at the old sweatshop, if they were enjoying a pleasant thought at the moment when that particular grommet came tumbling down the line and passed through their fingers, then that pleasant thought will cling to

the hole. Sometimes it's not so much a thought as a feeling. A nice warm feeling, like love, for example. Sunny and yellow. But when it's a sad feeling or an angry one that gets laced into your shoe, then you'd better watch out because that shoe might do crazy shit, like marching your feet right up to the front of the Nike store, for example, where you could wind up smashing the display window with a baseball bat made of furious wood. If that happens, it's still not your fault. Just apologize to the window, say I'm sorry to the glass, and whatever you do, don't try to explain. The arresting officer doesn't care about the crappy conditions in the bat factory. He won't care about the chain saws or the sturdy ash tree that the bat used to be, so just keep your mouth shut. Stay calm. Be polite. Remember to breathe.

It's really important not to get upset because then the voices will get the upper hand and take over your mind. Things are needy. They take up space. They want attention, and they will drive you mad if you let them. So just remember, you're like the air traffic controller—no wait, you're like the leader of a big brass band made up of all the jazzy stuff of the planet, and you're floating out there in space, standing on this great garbage heap of a world, with your hair slicked back and your natty suit and your stick up in the air, surrounded by all the eager things, and for one quick, beautiful moment, all their voices go silent, waiting till you bring your baton down.

Music or madness. It's totally up to you.

THE BOOK

I

So, start with the voices, then.

When did he first hear them? When he was still little? Benny was always a small boy and slow to develop, as though his cells were reluctant to multiply and take up space in the world. It seems he pretty much stopped growing when he turned twelve, the same year his father died and his mother started putting on weight. The change was subtle, but Benny seemed to shrink as Annabelle grew, as if she were metabolizing her small son's grief along with her own.

Yes. That seems right.

So, perhaps the voices started around then, too, shortly after Kenny died? It was a car accident that killed him—no, it was a truck. Kenny Oh was a jazz clarinetist, but his real name was Kenji, so we'll call him that. He played swing mostly, big band stuff, at weddings and bar mitzvahs and in campy downtown hipster clubs, where the dudes all wore beards and porkpie hats and checkered shirts and mothy tweed jackets from the Salvation Army. He'd been playing a gig, and afterward he went out drinking or drugging or whatever he did with his musician friends—just a little toot, but enough so that on his way home, when he stumbled and fell in the alley, he didn't see the necessity of getting up right away. He wasn't far from home, only a few yards from the rickety gate that led to the back of his house. If he'd managed to crawl a bit further, he would

have been okay, but instead he just lay there on his back, in a dim pool of light cast by the streetlamp above the Gospel Mission Thrift Shop dumpster. The long chill of winter had begun to lift, and a spring mist hung in the alleyway. He lay there, gazing up at the light and the tiny particles of moisture that swarmed brightly in the air. He was drunk. Or high. Or both. The light was beautiful. Earlier in the evening, he'd had a fight with his wife. Maybe he was feeling sorry. Maybe in his mind he was vowing to be better. Who knows what he was doing? Maybe he fell asleep. Let's hope so. In any case, that's where he was still lying an hour or so later, when the delivery truck came rattling down the alleyway.

It wasn't the truck driver's fault. The alley was filled with ruts and potholes. It was littered with half-emptied garbage bags, food waste, sodden clumps of clothes and broken appliances, which the dumpster divers had left behind. In the flat, gray light of the drizzling dawn, the truck driver couldn't distinguish between the debris and the musician's slim body, which by then was covered in crows. The crows were Kenji's friends. They were just trying to help by keeping him warm and dry, but everyone knows that crows love garbage. Is it any wonder that the driver mistook Kenji for a garbage bag? The driver hated crows. Crows were bad luck, and so he aimed his truck right at them. The truck was carrying crates of live chickens to the Chinese slaughterhouse at the end the alleyway. He stepped on the gas and felt the body bump beneath the wheels as the crows flew up in front of his windshield, obscuring his view and causing him to lose control and careen into the loading dock of the Eternal Happiness Printing Company Ltd. The truck tipped, and the crates of chickens went flying.

The noise of squawking birds woke Benny, whose bedroom window overlooked the dumpster. He lay there, listening, and then the back door slammed. A high, thin cry rose from the alley, uncoiling like a rope, like a living tentacle, snaking up into his window and hooking him, drawing him from bed. He went to the window, parted the curtains, and peered down into the street. The sky was just growing light. He could see the

truck on its side, wheels spinning, and the air was filled with flapping wings and flying feathers, although, being cage-raised, these chickens couldn't really fly. They didn't really even look like birds. They were just these white Tribble-like things, scrabbling away into the shadows. The thin cry tightened like a wire, drawing Benny's eyes to a spectral figure, enveloped in a cloud of diaphanous white, the source of the sound, the source of his world: his mother, Annabelle.

She stood there in her nightgown, alone in the pool of light cast by the streetlamp. All around her there was motion, feathers drifting like snow, but she stood perfectly still, like a frozen princess, Benny thought. She was looking down at something on the ground, and in a flash, he knew that something was his father. From where he watched, high up in his window, he couldn't see his father's face, but he recognized his legs, which were bent and kicking, just like they did when Kenji was dancing, only now he was lying on his side.

His mother took a step forward. "*Nooo!*" she cried, and fell to her knees. Her thick golden hair spilled down her shoulders, catching the light from the streetlamp and curtaining her husband's head. She leaned over, crooning as she tried to gather him up. "*No, Kenji, no, no, please, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it. . . .*"

Did he hear her? If he had opened his eyes just then, he would have seen his wife's lovely face hanging over him like a pale moon. Maybe he did. He would have seen the crows, perched on the rooftops and the swaying powerlines, watching. And maybe, looking over his wife's shoulder and beyond, he would have seen his son watching, too, from his distant window. Let's say he did see, because his dancing legs slowed then, stopped kicking and grew still. If, in that moment, Annabelle was Kenji's moon, then Benny was his distant star, and seeing him there, twinkling brightly in the pale dawn sky, he made an effort to move his arm, to raise his hand, to wiggle his fingers.

Like he was waving to me, Benny thought later. Like he was waving goodbye.

KENJI DIED ON the way to the hospital, and the funeral was held the following week. It was up to Annabelle to make the arrangements, but she wasn't much for planning these kinds of things. Kenji was the outgoing one, and as a couple they'd never entertained or had people over. She had few, if any, friends.

The funeral director asked her many questions about her loved one's family and religious faith, which she had trouble answering. Kenji didn't have any family that she knew of. He was born in Hiroshima, but his parents had died when he was young. His sister, who was still an infant at the time, had been sent to live with his aunt and uncle, while Kenji had been raised by their grandparents in Kyoto. He rarely talked about his childhood, except to say that his grandparents were very traditional and strict and he didn't get along with them, but of course they were dead now, too. Presumably his sister was still alive, but he'd lost touch with her. Early in their marriage, when Annabelle asked, he just smiled and stroked her cheek and said that she was all the family he needed.

As for faith, she knew his grandparents had been Buddhist, and once he told her about a time in college when he'd lived in a Zen monastery. She remembered how he'd laughed. *So funny, right? Me, a monk!* And she laughed, too, because he didn't seem at all monkish. He said he didn't need religion because he had jazz. The only religious thing he owned were some prayer beads, which he sometimes wore around his wrist. They were pretty, but she'd never seen him use them for praying. Given his Buddhist roots, it seemed wrong to have a Christian minister preside at his funeral, and so in answer to the director's questions, Annabelle said no, there was no family, no faith, and there would be no service. The director seemed disappointed.

"And on your side?" he asked solicitously, and when she hesitated, he added, "At times like these, it's good to have family—"

Memory flickered, ghostlike. She thought of her mother's shrunken body in the hospital bed. Her stepfather's dark shadow, looming in her

doorway. She shook her head. “No,” she said, firmly, cutting him off. “I said no family.”

Couldn’t he see? That she and Kenji were alone in the world, and this was what united them until Benny came along.

The funeral director glanced at his watch and moved on. He wondered about her thoughts regarding a viewing. Again, she hesitated, and so he explained. Viewing a loved one’s carefully restored remains could reduce the trauma that witnessing a tragic accident often caused. It would ease their painful memories and help those left behind accept the reality of the physical death. The viewing room was intimate and tastefully appointed. The funeral home would be happy to provide liquid refreshments for their guests, a wide selection of teas, coffee with an assortment of delicious flavored creamers, as well as some cookies, perhaps?

Creamers? she thought, trying not to smile. Seriously? She wanted to remember this to tell Kenji later—it was just the kind of absurd thing that would make him laugh—but the director was waiting, so she readily agreed that yes, cookies would be nice. He made a note and then inquired as to her wishes regarding the final disposition of her loved one’s remains. She sat on the edge of the overstuffed couch, heard herself answering yes to a cremation and no to a burial plot or a shelf in the crypt, when suddenly a thought arose: that she couldn’t tell Kenji about the delicious flavored creamers because Kenji was *dead*. This thought was quickly followed by a succession of others: that the loved one whose remains they were discussing was *Kenji*, and that these remains were the remains of *Kenji’s body*, the same beloved body that she knew so well and which, when she closed her eyes, she could picture so clearly, the sinewy muscles of his shoulders, the smooth tawny skin, the slope of his naked back.

She excused herself and asked if she might use the washroom. Certainly, the director said, and pointed her down the carpeted hallway. She closed the door behind her. Inside, scented fresheners infused the air from every wall socket. She dropped to her knees in front of the toilet bowl and vomited into the bright blue sanitized water.

NOW KENJI'S BODY lay in an open coffin in a parlor-like room at the funeral home. When Benny and Annabelle arrived for the viewing, the funeral director ushered them in and then backed away, discreetly, to give them a moment. Annabelle took a deep breath. Gripping her son's elbow, she started toward the coffin. Benny had never walked like this before, with his mother holding on to his arm like he was the one in charge. He felt like a handrail or a banister. Stiffly, he supported her, guiding her forward, and then they were standing side by side at the coffin's edge.

Kenji was a small man, grown smaller now in death. He was dressed in the light blue seersucker blazer that Annabelle had chosen for him, the one he wore with black jeans when he played summer weddings, minus the porkpie hat. His clarinet lay across his chest. Annabelle exhaled, a long, soft, punctured sigh.

"He looks okay," she whispered. "Like he's just sleeping. And the coffin's nice, too." When Benny didn't answer, she tugged on his arm. "Don't you think?"

"I guess," Benny said. He studied the body, lying there in the fancy coffin. The eyes were closed, but the face didn't look alive enough to be asleep. Didn't look alive enough to be dead, even. Didn't look like something that had ever lived. Someone had used makeup to cover up the bruises, but his dad would never have worn makeup. Someone had brushed the long black hair and arranged it loosely on the satin pillow. Kenji only wore his hair loose and hanging down like that when he was relaxing at home. In public, he always tied it back in a thick, black ponytail. All these details proved to Benny that the thing in the coffin was not his father. "You going to burn his clarinet, too?"

They sat in stiff folding chairs off to the side and waited. People started to arrive. Their ancient Chinese landlady, Mrs. Wong. Two of Annabelle's coworkers. Kenji's bandmates and his friends from the club scene. The musicians stood inside the doorway, looking like they wanted to leave, but

the funeral director urged them forward. Nervously, they wandered up to the coffin. Some of them lingered and stared. Others talked to the corpse, or cracked a joke—*Seriously, dude, a chicken truck?*—which Annabelle pretended not to hear, and then spotting the refreshment table, they headed quickly toward it, pausing to say a few awkward words to her and to give Benny a quick hug and a pat on the head. Annabelle was gracious. These were her husband's friends. Benny was twelve and hated the pats, but the hugs he hated worse. Some of the band members punched him on the shoulder. He didn't mind the punches.

Maybe it was the clarinet in the coffin that gave someone the idea, but as more people trickled in, more instruments started to appear, and then a couple of the band members set up in a corner of the room and began to play. Mellow jazz, nothing flashy. More guests arrived. When a bottle of whiskey showed up on the refreshment table, next to the creamers, the funeral director looked like he might object, but the trumpet player took him aside and talked to him. He receded, and the band played on.

Kenji knew people who knew how to party, and so when it was time to transport their friend's body to the crematorium, the musicians canceled the hearse and took matters into their own hands. Annabelle went along with them. The coffin was heavy, but Kenji added little to its weight, and so they were able to lift it, taking turns carrying it on their shoulders, New Orleans-style, through the narrow back alleys and the dark, rain-slick streets. Annabelle and Benny walked with them. Someone ushered them to the front of the procession, just behind the coffin, and handed Benny a bright red umbrella, which he held up high above his mother's head, proudly, like a brave flag or a pennant, until his arm stiffened and he thought it would break.

It was spring, and the rain had knocked the plum blossoms off the trees, and the pale pink petals lay plastered against the wet pavement. Overhead, seagulls wheeled and cried, riding the air currents higher and higher. From their vantage, the red umbrella far below must have looked like the red eye of a snake that was winding its way slowly through the sodden city. The

crows stayed lower down, tracking the procession more closely, flying from limb to limb through the trees, perching on the streetlamps and powerlines. By now the band had grown to almost its full size, and as the mourners processed through the greasy rain, the musicians played dirges and drank from brown-bagged bottles, which they passed around, while the hookers and junkies spun like windblown litter in their wake.

There wasn't room enough inside the crematorium for everyone, but the rain had let up, so the musicians stayed outside on the street and continued to play. Annabelle and Benny followed the coffin as far as the entrance, but when the door opened, Benny balked. He'd heard about the oven. Even if this thing in the box was not his father, he didn't want to see it thrown into a fire and burned up like a log or roasted like a piece of meat, so he insisted on staying outside with the trumpet player, who said it was cool. Annabelle looked distraught and then made a choice. She held her son's smooth, round face between her palms, kissed him quickly, and then turned to the trumpet player. "Don't let him out of your sight," she said, and then she disappeared inside.

The band moved from the dirges into a Benny Goodman set. Goodman was Kenji's favorite. They played "Body and Soul," and "Life Goes to a Party." They played "I'm a Ding Dong Daddy," and "China Boy," and "The Man I Love," and all the while Benny's heart was beating wildly as he thought about the flames in the oven. When it came time for the clarinet solo in "Sometimes I'm Happy," the brass fell silent, letting the drummer quietly mark the tempo with his whisk, holding the empty space where the clarinet should be. It was Kenji's theme song, and you could almost hear his ghostly riff, rising through the mist. And maybe Benny *did* hear it. He was listening intently, and the minute the break was over and the horns kicked back in, he slipped away. He was wiry like his daddy, a slim minnow of a boy, threading his way through the musicians, who were too stoned by then to notice. He'd seen where his mother had gone. When the heavy door closed behind him, he could still hear the music outside, but he was listening for something else now.

Benny . . . ?

The voice spoke from somewhere deep inside the building, and he followed. As he walked down a dim corridor, the noise from the ventilation system grew louder. He came to a waiting room, furnished with a couch and some low stuffed chairs. A vase of white plastic lilies sat on a side table next to a box of Kleenex. A wide picture window looked into the retort chamber, and even though Benny didn't know what it was called, he knew what went on inside, on the other side of the glass. He could see his mother. She was holding his father's clarinet, which looked weird and awkward in her hands because she didn't know how to play. Next to her was the fancy coffin. It was empty. Where was the body? His mother was alone, except for an attendant. They were standing on either side of a long, skinny, cardboard box, so nondescript that Benny barely noticed it, until he heard the voice again.

Benny . . . ?

Dad?

It was his father's voice. Benny could barely hear it over the din of the ventilation, but he knew it was coming from the cardboard box. He stood on his tiptoes, tried to see inside.

Oh, Benny . . .

His dad sounded so sad, like he wanted to say something but it was too late, and indeed, just at that moment, Annabelle gave a nod and turned away, and the attendant stepped forward and placed the lid on the box. Benny pressed his palms to the window.

"Mom!" he called, slapping the glass. "*Mom!*"

As if of its own accord, the box began to move.

"*No!*" Benny cried, but the glass was thick, and the ventilation was loud, and the cardboard box was on its way, gliding up a short ramp toward the mouth of the oven, which slid open to receive it. He saw the burning throat and the tongue of flame, heard the basso growl of fire and the sucking air, mingling with the threnody of a lone trombone from the street. "Don't Be That Way." They were playing "Don't Be That Way."

Benny pounded on the glass with his fists. “No!” he screamed. “No!”

Annabelle looked up then. She was gripping Kenji’s clarinet in her hands, and her face was as white as ash, and tears were streaming down it. She caught sight of her son through the glass, and her hands reached out to him, and he could see her lips move in the shape of his name.

Benny . . . !

Behind her, the box slipped into the oven and its mouth slid shut.

HE’D CALMED DOWN by the time they left the crematorium. Most of the band had packed up and gone home, and there were just a couple of guys still hanging around the memorial garden. The trumpet player was leaning against a wall, playing a mournful rendition of “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes,” as they watched the shimmering waves of heat rise up from the tall chimney.

Someone gave them a lift, and Benny went straight to bed and slept through until morning. When he finally woke, Annabelle told him he was staying home from school and gave him unlimited computer game time until lunch. In the afternoon, they took a long, slow bus ride back to the funeral home to collect Kenji’s ashes. The ashes were sealed in a plastic bag, inside a plastic box, inside a generic brown paper shopping bag, which Benny refused to carry on the bus, even though none of the other passengers could possibly know there were human remains inside. As they walked from the bus stop, the crows congregated in the alley, perching on the gate and on the roof of their house. Kenji had built a feeding station on the back porch from an old wooden TV stand that he’d found in the dumpster, and when Annabelle unlocked the back door, she noticed that it was bare and made a mental note to feed them. She put the bag with the ashes on the kitchen table, took out a baking sheet, and turned on the oven to preheat.

“Fish fingers or chicken nuggets?”

“Whatever.”

He needed something to do, she thought. Needed to keep busy. “Sweet-heart, could you feed your dad’s crows?” She handed him a plastic bag of stale moon cakes that Kenji scavenged from the Chinese bakery and kept hanging on the doorknob. She would have to remember to add scavenging mooncakes to the list of all the other errands and chores she was now responsible for.

Benny took the bag and went out to the porch, returning a moment later. “Here,” he said. He was holding a bottle cap, a broken clamshell and a tarnished gold button. She held out her hand, and he tipped the little objects into it.

“How strange,” she said, examining the button. “I’ve heard of crows leaving gifts.” And then it hit her. “Oh! Do you think—” She stopped herself.

“What?” Benny said.

“Nothing.” She took a small bowl from the shelf and placed the objects carefully in it. “Would you clear off the table, honey?”

The shopping bag with the ashes was still sitting on the table. Benny eyed it. It looked like groceries. “You just going to leave that there?”

“I thought we could make a special place for it after dinner.” She opened the freezer and took out box of chicken nuggets. “They do that in Japan, you know. Put ashes on little Buddhist altars in their homes.”

“We don’t have one of those.”

“We could make one.” She tore open the box and scattered the nuggets on the baking sheet. “On one of the bookshelves. We could put your dad’s favorite things there, like his clarinet, so he could have it in his afterlife.” She slid the pan into the oven and closed the door. “Get yourself some milk and set the table, too.”

“Is that like when he’s a zombie?”

Annabelle laughed. “No, sweetie. Your dad’s not a zombie. The after-life is something Buddhists believe in. It’s when your spirit is reborn and comes back to life in another body.”

“He’ll be a different person?”

“Maybe not a person. Maybe an animal. Maybe a crow . . .”

“That’s weird,” he said, going to the cutlery drawer. “Anyway, we’re not Buddhists. We’re not anything.” He yanked on the old drawer and then jiggled it open.

Annabelle looked up. “Do you want to be something?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know. Like a Buddhist. Or something else. A Christian?”

“No.” He got forks and his special spoon from the drawer and laid them on the table, carefully avoiding the ashes. He took a glass from the cupboard and went to the refrigerator.

“Your dad used to be a Buddhist,” Annabelle said. “Maybe he still is.”

“Now?”

“Sure. Why not?”

Benny stood in front of the refrigerator, staring at the cluster of kitchen magnets as he thought about this. He pushed a few of the magnets around. They were poetry magnets, and that was the point, to rearrange them and make lines with different meanings. Annabelle had gotten them at the thrift store to help Kenji with his English, and he used to make a poem for her whenever he remembered, and sometimes Benny made one, too. Some of the words were missing from the set, but Annabelle said it didn’t matter, because you didn’t need lots of words to make a poem.

“No,” Benny said finally. “He’s not anything now. He’s just dead.”

On the day he died, just before he left for the club, Kenji had made a poem. It was still there, amid the swarm of words.

“Well, sure,” Annabelle said. “But we don’t really know what that means. To be dead.”

Benny pushed some of the words into a new line. “Yes we do. It means he’s not alive.”

Annabelle was bending down over the open oven, flipping the nuggets, but the flat finality in her son’s voice made her turn.

“Oh, Benny, no!” She dropped the metal spatula, and the oven door slammed shut. She ran to the refrigerator, pushing him aside. “Put it back! We have to put it back! *Woman* goes here, and *symphony*, but there was an

adjective, too. What was it? I can't remember! Why can't I remember? Oh, Benny, do you?"

She turned, beseeching him, but he had backed away. He hadn't meant to dismantle his father's poem. The magnets wanted to be moved around, to make new poems, and he was just trying to help them. He opened his mouth to explain, but the words wouldn't come. He stood there, stricken, and seeing this, Annabelle broke off and reached for him.

"Oh, sweetheart," she said. "I'm so sorry. Come." She pulled him in close. He felt the weight of her arms around his shoulders, and the heave of her chest.

"I didn't mean—" he said.

She hugged him tighter. "I know, Benny," she said. "Don't worry. It's not your fault. It's all fine, don't cry, we're going to be fine. . . ."

He wasn't crying, but she was. When she finally released him, she used the hem of her T-shirt to wipe her face, and then they had dinner. Later that evening, they reconstructed Kenji's poem, but Benny never touched the magnets again or made another poem with them, and for a while, the raggedy constellation of words remained frozen.

My abundant woman mother goddess love r
 we are symphony together
 I am mad for you