

**UCLA**

**How Shall a Generation Know Its Story: The Edgar Bowers  
Conference and Exhibition April 11, 2003**

**Title**

Inviting a Friend to Supper

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3tz24048>

**Author**

Doyle, Suzanne

**Publication Date**

2003-04-11

How Shall a Generation Know Its Story: The Edgar Bowers Conference and Exhibition  
April 11, 2003, UCLA

**“Inviting a Friend to Supper”**

by Suzanne Doyle

This will surely be the least scholarly of all the papers delivered today.

My friendship with Edgar in the last few years of his life was one long rendition of Ben Jonson’s poem, “Inviting a Friend to Supper,” and this happy state of affairs is documented in our email exchange. Today I’ll be reading excerpts from that correspondence, from Edgar’s emails, that is. My selections fall roughly into three categories: Philosophy, Black Letters, and Travel.

1. Philosophy

“. . . my man  
Shall read a piece of Virgil, Tacitus,  
Livy, or of some better book to us,  
Of which we’ll speak our minds, amidst our meat;”  
From “Inviting a Friend to Supper,” Ben Jonson

*At the beginning of my friendship with Edgar, I didn’t believe he could find me and my highly un-intellectual life very interesting, so I asked if he would continue being my teacher: “Will you teach me philosophy?,” I asked. He laughed.*

Friday, Jan. 26, 1996  
Subject: Philosophy

Dear Suzanne, I enjoyed our dinner together very much--and seeing you after what seems a long time, though you hardly seemed any older! Just like me! I was going to recommend, as an “introduction” to thinking and talking about philosophical questions, a book by Arthur Danto, *Connections to the World*. I recall finding it very useful in defining what he calls “The Character of Philosophical Problems.” If you could find a copy and enjoyed reading it, we might have some talk of it, two amateurs together. It takes a long time and much re-tracing of one’s steps really to understand in detail the texts that one encounters. I think that I’m just beginning to grasp what Hegel means by saying the Real is Rational, the Rational Real . . .

*I had no idea, of course, what he was saying with respect to Hegel and responded that the Danto on philosophy was out-of-print. I could only find Danto on art. Edgar wrote back:*

Dear Suzanne, Sorry to hear about the Danto. [I] Don’t find the ones on art as useful or interesting; most “philosophers” write foolishly about art . . . if you find

a copy of Gilson's *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, get that! It's a wonderful book, fun as fiction, and always something to talk about. Also Eric Voegelin's *The Mind of the Polis* . . . Another wonderful book for its own sake and philosophical in the true sense and full of learning and information and insight. . . . I'm off tonight to a class in Chinese Cooking that Heals!

Sunday, September 22, 1996  
Subject: Week's plans

Dear Suzanne, . . . In Tuesday afternoon's class, we are introduced to the amazing coincidences of mathematics, though I don't think the instructor would envy my characterization of his revelations! . . . Flunked the first quiz in the Aristotle class! More on that over a guilty repast. Love, Edgar

November 21, 1996

Dear Suzanne, . . . The proofs are all read; now for the wait till February 22. We liked the Slanted Door on Valencia. Have you been there? Have decided to change my concentration of activity from philosophy to exercise, *corpore sano* taking precedence over *mens sana*; which means I intend to sign up for water aerobics. Right now the luxuriance of the minimalist Tao, Zen seeming much too fierce!!! Lunch soon? Love, Edgar

March 12, 1997  
Subject: Fame

O Suzanne, fame awaits you, though I have no fear of its spoiling your beautiful character, disciplined as it is by work, work, work. Of which little takes place at 1201 Greenwich St! My main expenditure of energy, other than trying to keep up with the philosophical lucubrations of William James, is trying to decide what and when to do about going to New York . . . I console myself for all this indecision by reminding myself that I did get an A on the quiz about CS Pierce. . . . When can you take a break and come for dinner? I tell James that he should be strong and good. You too, of course. Edgar

*Shortly thereafter I wrote to say how much I liked his poem "Dragon" and the closing lines of "Numbers."*

Saturday, March 15, 1997  
Subject: Strong and Good

Dear Suzanne, I am happy, of course, that you like the new poems: I am particularly fond of the two passages you mention. "John" is about John Finlay, written mainly by intuition, but pretty accurate, according to David Middleton.

Dick Davis has been teasing me about my maze-like syntax and suggests that I write some poems that have a period at the end of each line. The rascal! . . . Thanks for your message. Makes it seem that the book actually did get published and exists somewhere other than in a box in my apartment. Love, Edgar

*Later, when I wrote lamenting that I felt distinctly middle-aged. He dashed back:*

May 6, 1997  
Subject: Distinctly something

Dear Suzanne, I wonder how it feels to feel distinctly middle-aged, or any age. Perhaps you can write a philosophical poem on so depressing a subject? Mr. Jenkel [the owner of the Tamalpais apartments] in the elevator yesterday, said, Why doesn't someone invent a pill against aging: He's 94. I said, But you seem to have been taking them already, Mr. Jenkel . . . Love, Edgar

September 12, 1997  
Subject: Welcome back

. . . My primary reason for this message is to say that James and I opened and drank the bottle of Domaine Gauby and enjoyed it mucho. Thanks very much a lot . . . I am just through the second week of the course in the Philosophy of Science, which is pretty much a mixture so far, very casual and time-wasting, it seems to me, but it seems that all those teachers at USF waste a lot of time. I hope I didn't give that impression!!! . . . Love, Edgar

February 9, 1999  
Subject: Birthday Party RSVP

Suzanne, we've been getting especially good asparagus at the Safeway (!!!!) lately . . . The Hume class is really picking up steam. The young teacher just opens up to a kind of chaos; at the end, though, I at least have learned quite a bit. . .

## 2. Black Letters

“ . . . And we will have no Pooly, or Parrot by;”  
From “Inviting a Friend to Supper,” Ben Jonson

*In re-reading the emails I was struck by the almost complete absence of negative or critical commentary. This seemed unusual in a man whose arch, one-liners I'd felt dismissed nearly the entire body of literary history as unreadable during my undergrad years. Edgar had become elfin and light-hearted, almost child-like in*

*his delight with simply being alive and demonstrably loved. But every now and then he did still cast a dart at the Dark Side.*

March 14, 1996

Subject: Saturday and Review

Dear Suzanne, I know that knowing Don S[tanford] is writing a review gives room for trepidation – see his review of My book, pure malice – but I shouldn't have mentioned it if you hadn't!! . . . Great morning. A friend and I will get dressed up and go to the Fringale for lunch. Looking forward to our outing. Edgar

*We were meeting at Bizou, a French bistro and I asked him to translate the name for me.*

Subject: Bizou

. . . I don't know what bizou means; une bise is a light feathery kiss, sometimes pronounced, though, as I recall, bisou, or something like that. Robert Wells says that the French kiss so often because they are otherwise so mean to one another. Les Francais sont dur, as an Algerian said to me once in Paris. . . . See you soon!  
Edgar

Subject: Saturday's plans

Dear Suzanne, . . . Sad message from Bob Mezey; he and his partner in translation are about to be abandoned by Penguin, after years of being encouraged in their great labor, lied to, etc. I was right about publishing: it is the Vertigo! . . .

Subject: Change

Dear Suzanne, . . . I'm feeling my usual chipper self two days later, though much sleeping. . . . Christian went with me for the chemo; we finally had some rousing bouts of gin-rummy (he skunked me!), playing right through my discharge time, to the amusement of the nurses. Lunch with the Shankmans yesterday and their beautiful, appealing, beautiful, sympathetic daughters. Both C and I were much taken!!! . . . Terry . . . had a bad experience in Santa Cruz; had his arm around the waist of his friend and was assailed by a fundamentalist god person who called them evil, etc. etc. Invalidation and inauthentication, undeserving the dignity of being a person. Old story, of course . . . Much love, Edgar

Dear Suzanne, Dr. Rong Rong is a Chinese “herbalist and acupuncturist” extraordinaire . . . who was recommended to me by the holistic doctor . . . [I am] preparing for each day's quaffing a huge amount of twigs, branches, pieces of wood, seeds, pods, etc. previously soaked and boiled into an elixir, this operation needing to be done almost every day! There's so much stuff I had to get a new

larger very handsome Italian pot! She is full of enthusiasm, and her acupuncture is an endurance test. "It hurts," I said. "Some people scream," she said.

+++++

*It seems to me so Edgar to find pleasure in his 'new handsome Italian pot' while in the process of fighting for his life.*

### 3. Travel

"that, which most doth take my Muse, and me,  
Is a pure cup of rich Canary wine,  
Which is the Mermaids, now, but shall be mine."  
From "Inviting a Friend to Supper," Ben Jonson

*One of the things that excited Edgar the most during his last years was travel. No sooner was he back from one trip than he was planning the next. During one very serious spell in the hospital in the Spring of 1996, I was in Kauai. When I came to visit him in the hospital, the postcard I'd sent was propped on his bedside table. He said to me, "It would have been so easy just to--let go. But I decided to come back. I want to swim in that water."*

June 16, 1996

Dear Suzanne, Did you receive an answer to your last email, proposing dinner at 5:30 on Wednesday? . . . In any case, my response was Yes . . . we go to Kauai the 29 or 30 of July. I should be ready to climb coconut trees by then!!! Love,  
Edgar

Subject: Departure time

Dear Suzanne, We are eager to be gone!! I have packed sufficiently of bathing suit, sun tan lotion and an assortment of required and voluntary pills, and two cameras!!!  
Still feeling as if Kauai is a foreign country, and think about my pass port. Any suggestions as to inexpensive restaurants, places to buy vegetables and fruit, etc. If you hadn't sent me that post card, this eventuality would be still an unpotential . . . Je t'embrasse, Edgar

*Who else but Edgar would ever have written: "I have packed sufficiently of bathing suit . . ." ! And then he even wrote me while he was in Kauai.*

Dear Suzanne, a thousand thanks for the restaurant lore. we are trying EVERYTHING – almost. THE EXOTIC UNKNOWN and the rest of it. Mostly the beach, of course, and pineapples! Who would have thought a simple post card to lead to the Captain Cooks of the World!?! C[aptain] C[ook] Edgar

*The following year I went to Kauai again. And he responded:*

June 14, 1997

Subject: Summer Vacation

Dear Suzanne, Your message makes me yearn to go to Anahola Beach and swim among the bright fishes . . . however, no other trips for a while, for, unfortunately, the bone marrow test turns up a new diagnosis, which is basically that the marrow is lymphatic and I have no white blood cells. . . I'm giving myself shots and on the return from the north will begin a six month treatment of more intensive chemotherapy which has the effect of further damage to the immune system. All this is most ironical, for I've never felt better. . . I can see those parrot fish now. . . Lots of love, Edgar

October 15, 1997

Dear Suzanne, . . . I begin my new treatment this morning and am almost excited by the prospect; I've got two huge sandwiches from Whole Foods, a piece of cheese, some water and Musil's *Man Without Qualities* (first volume). The sun porch of the clinic on Parnassus has the most extraordinary command of the entire Bay; great for watching clouds . . . Love, as always, Edgar

*And on planning one of his trips to NYC:*

February 21, 1998

Subject: Farewell

Dear Suzanne, . . . So far plans include two Mozart operas. What else does one need! and lunches with friends. We'll squeeze in the museums somehow! All goes well, plans for Italy all taken care of . . . we'll be traveling just like rich folks. . . Christopher has been translating my poems into French. They sound much better! Maybe we should have written our poems in French in the first place. . . A meal at Plouf? Love, Edgar

January 14, 1998

Subject: Today

Well, Suzanne, here we are back, I assume, in our various routines, though mine changed somewhat by attendance (again!) at an Italian class, this time at Fort Mason. My mind thickens when Italian appears. The teacher asked how long I had studied Italian, after every one else said four months: *molti anni*, I confessed, but could not remember to say *Mi chiamo*, My name is. Puccini should have some use! . . . James is retired . . . He and I have pretty much decided to go to Italy

about April first, going first to Sicily and then to join Christopher and Sabine in Venice . . . Anyhow, let us break bread together before too long. Edgar

*The last email I received from Edgar was written shortly after he and I and James and Dick Davis had lunch at his beloved Fringale, which by the way, is French slang for 'I'm starving!' There would be other lunches and dinners and more laughter after that day, but no more email after this:*

September 17, 1999  
Subject: Louise

Dear Suzanne, Delighted that you can go to see \*Louise\* I'll be in touch about details; Turner arrives on Tuesday. I thought we might have an unimportant meal at that little Chinese restaurant on Hayes Street. Will remember the name. Maybe a[t] 6 pm? Anyhow, will give you a call or an EM. Lovely lunch yesterday, food, company, tutto! Edgar

#### Inviting a Friend to Supper

Tonight, grave sir, both my poor house, and I  
Do equally desire your company:  
Not that we think us worthy such a guest,  
But that your worth will dignify our feast,  
With those that come; whose grace may make that seem  
Something, which, else, could hope for no esteem.  
It is the fair acceptance, Sir, creates  
The entertainment perfect: not the cates.  
Yet shall you have, to rectify your palate,  
An olive, capers, or some better salad  
Ushering the mutton; with a short-legged hen,  
If we can get her, full of eggs, and then  
Lemons, and wine for sauce: to these, a coney  
Is not to be despaired of, for our money;  
And, though fowl, now, be scarce, yet there are clarkes,  
The sky not falling, think we may have larks.  
I'll tell you more, and lie, so you will come:  
Of partridge, pheasant, wood-cock, of which some  
May yet be there; and godwit, if we can:  
Knat, raile, and ruff too. How so ere my man  
Shall read a piece of Virgil, Tacitus,  
Livy, or of some better book to us,  
Of which we'll speak our minds, amidst our meat;  
And I'll profess no verses to repeat:  
To this, if ought appear, which I not know of,  
That will be the pastry, not my paper, show of.



Digestive cheese, and fruit there sure will be;  
But that, which most doth take my Muse, and me,  
Is a pure cup of rich Canary wine,  
Which is the Mermaids, now, but shall be mine:  
Of which had Horace, or Anacreon tasted,  
Their lives, as do their lines, till now had lasted.  
Tabacco, Nectar, or the Thespian spring,  
Are all but Luther's beer, to this I sing.  
Of this we will sup free, but moderately,  
And we will have no Pooiy, or Parrot by;  
Nor shall our cups make any guilty men:  
But, at our parting, we will be, as when  
We innocently met. No simple word,  
That shall be uttered at our mirthful board,  
Shall make us sad next morning: or affright  
The liberty, that we'll enjoy tonight.