

POEMS AND COMMENTARY
by KENNETH DEIFIK

THE ONE-INCH STORE WAS LEVELED

Seven Jewish mystics sat upon a bench.
Suddenly they were no longer mystical.
That age had passed.

I, a man accosted by former mystics,
Mull the future in the face of my stars.
Supposedly I'll soon be hit by an animal.

A certain rabbi returned from the dead,
Only to discover himself to be terribly lonely,
And for no good reason.

"Teach me about Elvis," he said.
"But that's how I make my living!"
"I didn't say I wouldn't pay."

A man gets a little sister for his fifth birthday.
This man is a mystic.
The sister is one of his 'Greatest Hits.'

One day all the stars lined up,
Appearing on Earth to be an immense baseball seam.
I was born just then.

Everyday I follow a star, full of hope
That this might be the No-kidding Star.
There is no such star.

I shoved a mystic into a cup
And threw him in a punchbowl.
It made me feel like a failure.

Every day of this year a disaster is avoided
Due to my good luck charm.
Here is the foot of a mystic

LEONARD RUBBED HIS HAND

Man (left) hugs his son. In preparation for this, so much dumb history. This was the man Who ran the show. Bozo hugs his son. Where else but in the movies? And if this is not a valid Question it may be incumbent upon us to question all approaches. There are no movies. Doctor No hugs His son. This passionate individual is a moron. Steve Miller's wife hugs his son. Steve shoots Home movies to the envy of other proud dads. This is passover night. Horace hugs his son. Untroubled, the ancient world carries on without him momentarily. Bartender hugs his son. We are Not amused. "It gives us a heart dysfunction." A rube hugs his son. Before they both wither away

They look up 'goombah' in the
Kenneth Deifik to English dictionary.
Gertrude Stein hugs his son.
Steve's cats, Skinny and Cutty sleep
through this historic occasion. 'What
would cats care, anyway?'
Don hugs his son Don, Jr. Instant myth.
Boris Pasternak hugs his son,
and anyone who loves Pasternak
Is instantly moved. A fly hugs his
son. His feelings remain concealed,
although he has a rather morose
Look in his eye. This fly is a Tse-tse.
Jacques-Louis David hugs his son, only
in his son's dream, as he is dead.
Dead dead dead. Bora Minewich
hugs his son. This great harmonica
virtuoso's son is named Louie. He
Is shy. A part in a play hugs his
son who is a part in a haircut.
So big deal you say? Stendhal hugs
His son. That is, if he has one. If
not, he is deceived. Dooley Wilson
hugs his son. What else did he
Do besides singing 'As Time Goes By,'
in Casablanca? He hugged his
son. Fats Domino hugs his son. A
Family tradition. Ed McMahon hugs
his son. Not so hard, dad. B.B.King
hugs his son. 'Feel,' in popular music,
Means performing a theme so that
its meaning is clear, whatever

that might refer to. In a three
Or four note phrase, that might not
be so easy. B.B.King communicates
this to his son with each squeeze.
Brahms hugs his son, but quickly,
as he has an appointment to
sit for James Schuyler. Lassie
Hugs his son. This is my poem
about that. Nathan Rothschild
hugs his son. His only real joy.
The invisible nude hugs his son
who is a Datsun. Barely an
hour passes. George Bernard Shaw
Hugs his son. They are both
thirty today. The drawing called
'The Duck-Rabbit' because inherent
Formal ambiguities make it appear
to represent a duck facing
left or a rabbit facing right,
Hugs his son. This scene is
repeated once a day for as
long as it takes to get it right.

SILAS TOUCHES A STRANGER

"The Unknowing Bear" sails his hat at the "space ships."

All the Aliens notice this.

All the Non-aliens stir the Tang.

All the unrelated things.

The music of the completely unrelated.

The English-speaking humans have arrived
On the new planets.
Here people speak English with lungs full of butane,
The way it was meant to be spoken.
Who knew?

My father died on one of these planets.
I, a Klingon.

The people hustle my dead old man off
To the planet of things you read about.

Bye.

from **AN INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN PAUL MILLER**
at St. John's University, Spring 2007

When I am in the state of 'writing a poem' half the work is seeing where I'm heading and making a left turn to somewhere else, somewhere I didn't expect to land. I wouldn't write if I knew where I was going when I started, the surprise is where it's at.

I find that the minute I stick an idea into my poetry the entire thing goes dead, so as fast as I see an idea looming up on the horizon I shoot off in a random direction, having found that the rhythm of what I'm writing will take me toward some unexpected place if the rhythm is any good.

The most important aspect of poetry for me is The Voice. When I found my Voice, it was all very sudden.

The Backstory: The era of "flatness" in poetry was in full ascendancy. Anything that had the "sound of poetry" as we had known it til then suddenly sounded corny. Generation after generation of Americans had been taught "poetry" out of a curriculum by teachers who couldn't stand what they thought was poetry. It wasn't their fault, their teachers had no sense of what was good about good

poetry, either.

Even the best poetry can be endowed with this 'bad poetry-ness,' and often still is when it's read out loud in a poetic fashion. Anything that attempts to make a poem into something it isn't kills it. Most good poetry is not profound and very little of it will change your life, and the affected, 'profound,' way of reading a poem is no more effective than using an affected tone to read a recipe out loud.

So New York poets of the 60's and 70's drained the swamp and found that if they made a conscious effort to not make their poems "sound like poetry," if they made it a rule to flatten out the Voice and even the actual content - suddenly Poetry came alive again, and you could see what all the fuss had been about in previous times. My favorite title back then, and now, must be "A Man Holding an Acoustic Panel" by David Shapiro. That's a seriously flat utterance. In any previous era it would have been impossible to get a poetry magazine editor to hear the poetry in that beautiful phrase. But once poets started flattening out The Poem, nothing could be more poetic. David Shapiro, Stephen Paul Miller and other young poets of the era rid American poetry of all the baloney that was getting in the way. In fact, the very effort of making sure the poem achieved flatness often resulted in extremely beautiful poems. Strive for flatness, get beauty. Go figure.

One day, on a visit to my parent's home, a very flat sentence popped into my head. It was not flat like David or Stephen, but it was flat. It also had something deeply moving about it, so I wrote it down, and it looked exactly like the first line of a poem. I wrote a few more lines in the same voice and sure enough I was looking at my first poem, meaning the first poem of mine that got me excited because it gave me the strong feelings that my favorite poems gave me, not because it looked or sounded like those poems.

I showed the poem to Stephen Paul Miller, whose poetry I was helping to edit, he read it and looked up and said "You're in!"

I went home and tried to use my new Voice to write stuff. Not knowing what to write I tried to write 'about' things. I called Stephen up, read him what I had done and he very kindly told me "That stuff doesn't swing."

I knew it, too. The problem was that I had been trying to use the Voice rather than let the Voice speak for itself. My Voice made my ideas sound trivial,

because they were. I solved the problem in the following way:

I wrote a line in my Voice. It did not matter what it 'meant,' but it had to feel like it meant something, it couldn't just be a collection of words.

I then wrote a second line in my Voice, sort of in response to the first line.

I then covered up the first line and wrote a third line in response to the second line.

Covered up the second line and wrote a fourth line in response to the third line, and on and on all the way up to the fiftieth line or so.

This gave me a glob of fifty lines where no line had any relation to anything but the line before it. No 'call-backs', no ironic references to earlier lines.

I read through the glob of lines. Some lines were great, some felt corny. I got rid of all but the lines that I liked and read it through again. It was starting to feel like a poem - that is, I was getting the feeling I got when I read the poetry I really liked.

I took what I had and flattened anything out that needed flattening, and started seeing a way to make the glob flow so that even though there was no central idea in the work The Voice itself gave it the good feeling of good poetry, and the feeling of good poetry IS what makes poetry good, to me anyway.

Here's what counts: instead of trying to make a poem like Wallace Stevens would make a poem, or David Shapiro or Stephen Paul Miller or Robert Herrick, my only endeavor was to see if I could let my newfound Voice make a real poem with no intention behind it other than that it should have, and give off, the good feeling of good poetry.

And that's the road I've followed out with poetry ever since, and it's allowed me to make poetry that doesn't sound or feel like anyone else's but is still poetry. I let things emerge through my own voice, cut out the stuff that doesn't move me (which will often be 80% of what I write) and shape the stuff that does. I don't cover lines with pieces of paper, I quickly got the knack of just letting my Voice rip.

Smart readers have on occasion pointed out connections within one of my poems that I didn't know were there. Some writers make uproarious fun of readers who find things in their work that they didn't put there, but I think it's fantastic. As must be obvious at this point, I love the feeling of being surprised by my own work. If I were to write a political essay and the reader took away a point opposite to the one I was trying to make, either I made my point poorly or the reader read it poorly. But if I've done my poet's job correctly every reader will find stuff in my poems that I didn't put there.

In my poem *Silas Touches A Stranger* I wrote three unrelated lines, after which I was apparently struck by the absurdity of my 'unrelatedness' approach - I think I decided to make a fake mathematical set of

All the unrelated things.

If I'd left it at that I would have encapsulated my poetry so completely that I might've considered giving up writing completely, and I didn't want to do that, so I wrote the line

The music of the completely unrelated.

so as to start up anew. To this day I have no idea what the phrase "the music of poetry" refers to, except where it refers to an aspect of poetry that makes people dislike poetry. It's a corny old phrase that, to me, describes nothing or worse.

But does 'the completely unrelated' give off music? I don't think so. But I do know that by allowing seemingly unrelated things into a poem something new happens each time. Stuff you didn't know was there emerges. And for me, the good feeling of a new poem emerges, and that is, for me, the only reason to take the effort to write poetry.