



Influence

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By Ken **P**oyner

WHY I LIKE IT: *Poetry Editor HEZEKIAH writes Ken Poyner is enchanting, entrancing, spellbindingly winding and weaving his cosmic, universal yarns, “I not only know the skeletons in the closets, / I know them by first name.” The man is a walking, talking epigram on stilts “The art / To getting what you want is not / Wanting too much. I do well.” ♪♪♪... ‘Satan laughing with delight’ “I am the thing they have to think about / When they have nothing at all to think about. / For the nothing I really know / I do one hell of a job.” “Seeing only divine will, only your deaf mission: / Your plodding, soul rending, mindless mission.” ...demon or demigod, but doubtless otherworldly. Ever get the feeling there is a class of being playing in some other league of which you are utterly unaware? Ken Poyner affects this. I just know the man is toying with me, but I’m still half hoping it’s each of us...I could quote him into the mystical infinite, but it would seem to appear, he’s already claimed its ownership. Nonetheless, I’d be wasting your time stealing your take. But, if you are still reading this, permit me to beg a one question: What might be your greatest source of inspiration? Read Poyner, it will place second— Pass the baton, I could go on-and-on, but also-rans tire easily, pausing to graze and wonder...where in some cyberspace we might get his number, mine his web of insights: “So perfect in feature as to be featureless, / His hand in gesture meaningless and everywhere exceptional.”*

Oh, lastly, as an addendum, Ken was concerned in his submission preface that his last piece “‘See, It Isn’t So Hard’ might be just a bit racy.” He’s quite right, how could Fleas resist? Here it is, see it here first...(To maintain poet’s spacing, each poem is on its own page.) HS

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CIVILIZING INFLUENCE

I not only know the skeletons in the closets,
I know them by first name.
We still have lunch together, relive
Old times. I know where the bodies are buried,
And buried many of them myself: their faces
Angelic as the dirt filled in their vacancies.
There is nothing I cannot get away with.
For years my job has been
Whatever I want it to be.
Eight hours of lunch, no problem.
A week on the clock without
Showing up, doable. Yes, there are limits.
I have no executive office. My boss
Is sleeping with his secretary, yet
I have no secretary. The art
To getting what you want is not
Wanting too much. I do well.
Moguls fear me, but not enough
To make my demise a priority. Word
Has been passed down, from old managers
To new, that I have the goods:
On whom it does not matter.
In every place someone has the goods:
Someone knows the empty secrets,
Someone can be the potential for baseless threats,
Someone fashions corporate terror into a tool
For organization and discipline. In this place
That is my job, my passion.
Executives on the fast track are told
About me, cautioned, learn
To single me out each day for *good morning*,
Then hold their humanity closer than ever
They thought they again would have to.
I am the thing they have to think about
When they have nothing at all to think about.
For the nothing I really know
I do one hell of a job.

CONVERSION

This is the day you are convinced.
You stand for the challenge, you take
The exam, you rake in the orthodoxy
Like leaves the wind has made yours,
Even though they come from the neighbor's tree.
All things make sense if seen as being
Within the lines of their own independent physics.
This is your day to see all the world
As something confirming or
Something opposed. Welcome.
It is only the outsiders who suffer doubts.
Welcome. Welcome.
Usher this new cell of the body
Gently into your routine. One
Within One. Make no disquiet
And there will be no disquiet within you.
Surrender. Surrender and be as
The grasses, or the wolves,
Seeing only divine will, only your deaf mission:
Your plodding, soul rending, mindless mission.

EXCEPTION

I am not so sure you understand this:
They were perfect strangers.

Not mismatched in any way:
None too tall, none too short;
Each of a perfect weight and proportion;
Handsome or pretty enough,
But not to distraction.
Their voices drifted melodiously
Around ordinary objects, effortlessly worked
Its way into the public discourse.
Even if they were accidental
You could not help but marvel,
Rub the dull flat of your jacket
And think of childhood promises.

I am on this corner every morning
Between 7:10 and 7:15 and I had never
Seen them before. But I recognized them
Immediately, the nape of my neck a-shudder,
My backbone rustling like wheat gone wild.
One leaned forward as polite as could any
Stranger approach another, his face
So perfect in feature as to be featureless,
His hand in gesture meaningless and everywhere exceptional.

He said, *You know, don't you?*
And they nodded, the whole lot of them:
Just a tilt of the head. And it was my turn.

GIG

Billy Voodoo plays his music
In a stoically thick, southern style
That can fill a room like molasses
Straddling the last fork full of tin diner pancakes:
And have you dreaming anew your own nickel history.
Billy Voodoo plays to nearly half packed
Houses four nights a week, his lowest
Notes rattling your molars, his highest
Shed like the skin of a snake.
One thing to know, though:

Billy has no testicles.

Billy used to have testicles,
Much the same as you or I:
Testicles that would dangle when he walked,
Get in the way when he sat,
Itch from being cooped up in worn-cotton.
Ordinary, everyday, multi-purpose testicles.

But, at some point, he left them somewhere --
And by the time he noticed they weren't with him,
He had been to so many confusing places
That it was hopeless to try to think
Where those specific testicles might be.
Not that having lost his testicles
Interferes with his music, or with his ability
To lazily draw the day's misery out of you
With his languid, lolling sounds.

He does just fine without them.

Some in the music industry say that perhaps everyone
Would be better off without readily accessible testicles:
Maybe all performers should have
His, or her, testicles held separately
In escrow, getting them back only when
The propriety of the need can be agreed upon.

I don't know what Billy thinks.
His music can make his mind a muddle.

But if you run across Billy's testicles, please:
Collect them carefully, and the next time you are out, drop them in one
Of those blue, corner squatting mailboxes. I'm sure
The postal service will know what to do with them;
And Billy, at least some part of him,
Might like to hold them delicately
Just one more inspiring time.

HARVEST

When you see the lightening gatherers
You know the big storm is coming,
That you have only moments to find
A place to stay dry and un-sparked.

They amble across our open spaces, fields
Or parking lots, the back yard
Of the neighbor with the largest
Back yard in the neighborhood – their narrow
Brimmed hats and old sacks fixed
Across their foreheads, their ancient clothes
Crackling with sullen, uncounted years of rain.

There is no excitement about them,

Nor even a sense of amiable drudgery: only purpose,
The simple mechanics of a job
They have the training and knowledge for.
Hearing thunder, they contentedly look to the sound,
Staring the clouds in. Cautiously, each
Lifts an arm, opens the hand.

The cumulonimbus reach masterfully down
And the ground's sympathetic charge builds.
From the safety of our houses we watch,
The rain beginning to beat its frustration
On our windows, our chance to see
The first one catch lightening soon streaked and spattered.

Oh no, don't go onto the porch,

Exposed like a wedding afterthought:
You could be struck, your life
Pulled into the recidivist, chaotic electricity. Soon
You will see how the sacks writhe
With light, the weight pulling each catchers'
Head well back as they twist and load,
The rain in their faces, beating
Its plea, demanding: in the instant
Of the capture, the downpour lucid alone.

When it is done we can go to their camp,
Random ragged tents spread
Garrulously like a field hospital in the best
Vacant space above the water table. You
Will see the lonely pockets of dark, the sacks
Turned inside out, gatherers exhausted
In their own piles, all the endless drying.

It is a sorter at the last you want to be.

PROGRESS

We live in the alley.
The buildings at times
Seem but a handful of feet apart,
But every night there is room
To stretch out and calm away
The day's feral happenstance.
The people in the buildings
Recognize us as neighbors.
There is no stigma.
One allows us to run a power cord
From his third story back bedroom,
Electrify a hot plate and a reading lamp.
This tarp here was provided
By a nice couple whose balcony
Is always alive with light and activity.
My son has even dated
A girl or two from each building,
Brought one back to dinner
On our three-legged table
Wedged on one side into a brick notch.
I cannot complain. Mostly
After eleven o'clock it is quiet. With storms
The rain pools in this alley further back,
Allowing us a measure of dry.
Not much oil comes in from the main street.
Mornings are early, but we can accept it.
We have our breakfast from the hot dog carts,
Know all the vendors, wave at every one.
It is almost as though
This were our alley,
Our own ground. My children
Think unthinkingly of it as a home.
I think of it as soon perilously empty
Once the children move on.
I would imagine that from your perspective it is
Just an alley: the extrapolated place
Between two buildings; the comfortable vacancy
Between paired collections of adequate apartments. Look
What I have done with it.

SEE, IT ISN'T SO HARD

Somewhere children are learning cowboys and Indians.
I have seen it on TV on days
When I can't get my ass off to school,
Can't get my ass out to tricks,
Can't make the part time waitressing job
That costs me only a quick
Pop from behind by the manager once a week.

On TV, I would be the older sister
Who gets all the kids out of the wagon
When the flaming arrow hits the canvas cover.
Smoothing my dress as I ran,
I would herd my smaller, dim-witted relatives
Into the gulley not yet a drainage ditch
That runs for just such cinematic needs
Along the stingy yet straight westward trail. As soon
As we all were lying down safe, and were nothing
But thirsty eyes, the men would ride in
With repeating rifles and that would be
A good end to those nasty and not so
Street smart Indians. We would be left

With a wagon and no canvas, and
Off camera I would know what to do,
Shamelessly screwing the whole
Electric posse for enough cash
To buy fresh material. Then
I would teach the younger children to string it.
We would go on, the little patchwork wagon
In the long righteous train, piloted by me:
On, until we got here and for
The next hundred years spit ourselves
Into the land, making sure there were high rises
And delis and grocery stores and
Mr. Morel letting me have a job
Taking blue collar diner orders for just
One dry, bumpy ride a week, bent over that
Comfortless wrapping counter: with
The neighborhood's escaped children
At the establishment's barely-cracked-open,
Employees-only, back door
Learning only the outline, imagining only

The highlights. Or maybe on TV
I would have been one of the Indians:
Tall, and tan skin rough to the touch,
The feathered maiden who, polarizing beauty
That she is, against her father's wishes
Let go that marvelous, flaming arrow.

THE POET SPEAKS: *I have always been concerned with context. Once I was told that everything makes sense within a belief system if you are a believer. I am often looking for circumstances that only make sense if you inhabit the specialized world in which those circumstances exist and evolve. Though I do like to peak out now and again from that specialized world, give the wink that seals the joke.*

I was not much interested in poetry, until, in pursuit of a young lady during high school, I read some Randall Jarrell, and was hooked. My academic and work background has been largely outside of the literary coloring book, so my perspective I think is far more practical than technical wordsmithery. I enjoy establishing a slightly tilted beginning point and letting it bang about like an old-style ball in an old-style pinball machine. I won't know what I can score until the particular game is finished.

AUTHOR BIO: Ken's four collections of brief fictions and four collections of poetry can be found at Amazon and most online booksellers. He spent 33 years in information system management, is married to a world record holding female power lifter, and has a family of several cats and betta fish. Individual works have appeared in "Café Irreal", "Analog", "Danse Macabre", "The Cincinnati Review", and several hundred other places. He has had seven Pushcart nominations without fielding a single win.