

A Study Of Shapiro

By ROY SCHEELE

Sixteen years have passed since Karl Shapiro won the 1945 Pulitzer Prize in poetry for his "V-Letter and Other Poems."

Shapiro at the time was with the Army in New Guinea. "V-Letter" was only his second book of poems. Other than a book he had had privately printed in 1935 ("Poems"), which he says by now he would hardly recognize as ever having been his own, his first book was "Person, Place and Thing," also published in his absence with the Army, in 1942, by a New York firm, Reynal & Hitchcock.

In both books, Shapiro combined potentiality with a native and simple regard for reality. The one, "V-Letter," was a deepening and mellowing of the frank detail and bitter-and-sweet lyric of the other. "V-Letter" reinforced the actual so cleanly celebrated in "Person, Place and Thing." In both, simile and metaphor were seen as standing for some sharp, if small, particular of the fullest potential of the actual thing. The language was simple, concise, and Shapiro's.

It is this latter point that makes "V-Letter" especially good reading today, and which has established the book and Shapiro in American letters.

Shapiro has said that what poetry today needs is creative non-conformity, the daring to be different of a Blake, Shelley or Frost. He backs up these beliefs with his work. His books of poems are a building up of acceptances and rejections and loves and hates as is found in the daring and inevitability of a single poem, line, or word.

For instance, in "The Fly," a poem out of "Person, Place and Thing," Shapiro sits in on the feeling of the situation with his words. He creates, out of the periphery of a single word, a whole world. One such word in the poem is "promontory," a noun Shapiro uses to say "nose". The poem is full of such one-word worlds, and simply placed statements, as the horse which switches "the hurricane of his heavy tail" at the annoying fly:

THE FLY

O hideous little bat, the size of snot,
With polyhedral eye and shabby clothes,
To populate the stinking cat you walk
The promontory of the dead man's nose,
Climb with the fine leg of a Duncan-Phyfe
The smoking mountains of my food
And in a comic mood
In mid-air take to bed a wife .
Riding and riding with your filth of hair
On gluey foot or wing, forever coy,
Hot from the compost and green sweet
decay,
Sounding your buzzer like an urchin toy—
You dot all whiteness with diminutive
stool,
In the tight belly of the dead
Burrow with hungry head
And inlay maggots like a jewel.

At your approach the great horse stomps
and paws
Bringing the hurricane of his heavy tail;
Shod in disease you dare to kiss my hand
Which sweeps against you like an angry
flail;
Still you return, return, trusting your
wing
To draw you from the hunter's reach
That learns to kill to teach
Disorder to the tinier thing.
My peace is your disaster. For your death
Children like spiders cup their pretty
hands
And wives resort to chemistry of war.



In fens of sticky paper and quicksands
You glue yourself to death. Where you are
stuck
You struggle hideously and beg
You amputate your leg
Imbedded in the amber muck.
But I, a man, must swat you with my hate,
Slap you across the air and crush your
flight,
Must mangle with my shoe and smear
your blood,
Expose your little guts pasty and white,
Knock your head sidewise like a drunk-
ard's hat,
Pin your wings under like a crow's,
Tear off your flimsy clothes

And beat you as one beats a rat.
Then like Gargantua I stride among
The corpses strewn like raisins in the dust,
The broken bodies of the narrow dead
That catch the throat with fingers of dis-
gust.
I sweep. One gyrates like a top and falls
And stunned, stone blind, and deaf
Buzzes its frightful F
And dies between three cannibals.
Poetry like this is more than says.

And so it is in "V-Letter." As Shapiro wrote, in the introduction to the book, most of the poems were written "under the peculiarly enlivening circumstances of soldiering." But these were not war poems in the traditional sense, nor was Shapiro a happily fat "war poet" writing only of suffering in wartime. He said:

"There is no need to discuss the private psychological tragedy of a soldier. It is not the commonplace of suffering or the platitudinous comparison with the peace, or the focus on the future that should occupy us; but the spiritual progress or retrogression of the man in war, the increase or decrease in his knowledge of beauty, government and religion." What wanted saying was the private psychological tragedy of Man.

The title poem of the book is a letter from the poet to his wife and is a tribute to her, but investigates side causes within the circle of their marriage, and then holds back to their love at the end, like a returning letter "reduced in size but not in meaning."

The poem shows a fastidious knowledge of something that has come over love and confirmed it. And Shapiro's cryptic bringing to bear on his subject does not conceal a great deal of tender intensity for it, just as hard laughter often brings out tears.

In another poem, "New Guinea," Shapiro most readily demonstrates a concern for form that lies under all his poems. Midway through the poem in loose iambs, Shapiro introduces a verse in hendecasyllabics, a classical Greek line of eleven metrical syllables:

"Morning I arise and marvel at the laden
Lush abandoned branch and brush of
soaked
Laocoons of trees in throes of ser-
Pent-tightening tendrils and air-clamber-
ing roots."

then swiftly returns to iambs:

"Awake, the largest snowiest butterfly
Floating with eyes of lavender between
The men strung heavily like weighted bats
And finishing, from tree to tree,
their rest."

Such a changing in midform is done so metrically sound that the reader is not aware.

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