The Hard Part Is Knowing What To Say:
The Poetry Of Jerry Mirskin

I have to admit to being favorably disposed right from the start to a book of poems that begins with the lines, “I called my uncle. I had something to tell him. / Out of the clear blue, he sent me five hundred dollars.” A simple, four-word sentence. A solid, ordinary, interesting word like “uncle.” A practical phrase like “five hundred dollars.” A story forming. Diction down-to-earth enough to include an idiomatic expression, not to say cliché: “out of the clear blue.” Then comes a little explanation: “He was giving gifts to his nieces and nephews. / I was living in
Binghamton, working as a substitute teacher / and living in a crappy apartment.”

Binghamton, New York, is a place I know slightly, but even if I didn’t, the specificity of naming an actual place would be appealing. Taken from the same lexicon as “uncle” and “out of the clear blue,” “substitute teacher” and “crappy apartment” are phrases used more often in everyday communication than in poetry. Following this comes a direct statement of what the speaker of the poem is thinking and feeling: “I didn’t know if I would have work from day to day. / I didn’t know why he was giving me a gift, but when I saw the check, I was grateful.” I don’t mean to overanalyze, just slow things down, to try to see where the tone comes from, and to begin to understand a method and a style that seem all simplicity.

The poet in question is Jerry Mirskin. He published two previous collections of poems, Picture a Gate Hanging Open and Let that Gate Be the Sun, and In Flagrante Delicto, both of which were good books, lively and lyrical. But in his third book, Crepuscular Non Driveway, he has broken through to another level. The titles of all three collections suggest a certain extravagance of language and gesture, and that quality is indeed part of his repertoire. But in this latest book, it is radical plain-spokenness, the impression of somebody talking as somebody really would talk, that is in the forefront, and the antec of his talent seems raised. The book’s title may be ornate or a little weird, a phrase a Language Poet might have come up with, or that could be the name of an alternative rock band, like Dashboard Confessional or Car Seat Headrest. But the book’s title is not typical, and the titles of the poems are more likely to be “I Called My Uncle,” “Mike,” “Golf Course,” or “My Father Threw a Plate.” Still, while the book’s language is deeply colloquial, the extravagance is not absent. It appears in metaphors, and in places where the storyteller morphs, unobtrusively, into the philosopher. And in moments when the casual language shifts, unobtrusively, to the formal,
somehow without losing the conversational tone. The poems are in love with ordinary speech, right down to the stock phrases I’ve mentioned, and others: “Special Learners,” “good guy,” “well maybe.” Yet their phrasings and turns of thought have a great freshness. That’s a start at describing Mirskin’s style in this book. There is an atmosphere of fresh air. There is a clarity like clear, cool water. Long drafts of cool water.

The content of the poems, like the style and tone, is simple and complex. Subtle meditations on the most ordinary situations. The sidewalk in front of his house. Trash pick-up day, the sorting of recyclables. Lunch with his wife at an Indian restaurant. Mundane, but not, in Mirskin’s hands, dull. I can’t think of a book of poems that is more consistently not dull, more consistently engaging. Humor is part of how he does it. Humor was part of his earlier poems as well, but here his gifts for being serious and being funny have blossomed simultaneously, and the poems are as entertaining as they are moving, and vice versa.

A key change is the length of the lines. Previously he used irregular, half-page lines, based in intuitive free verse rhythms, nothing unusual. Now, the lines have expanded, generally reaching all the way across the page. They extend out there near the border of prose poem territory, but they have cadence, cast and return, crafted from declarative sentences, one after another. Often the end of the line is the end of the sentence. Most of the periods in the book are out there on the right margin. There is variation; for example, sometimes shorter sentences are joined together to make a single line: “I try not to antagonize. I try to get along.” It’s a strong rhythm he makes from his sentences, short and long, and something very important would be lost if the poems were set as prose. Form is an expression of content, as they say, and Mirskin’s long lines are right for the blend of narrative and discursiveness that is the great pleasure of these poems.

A lot of contemporary American poetry draws on anecdote and personal reminiscence, often about family and childhood. Those who listen to The Writer’s Almanac, Garrison Keillor’s NPR venue for poetry, will know what I mean. Mirskin certainly draws from that well. What makes his poems exceptional? For one thing, their length. They tend to be a little longer than the poems read on The Almanac—two or three long-lined pages. But it’s not just a matter of length. It’s the way Mirskin uses the slight spaciousness. He is a little expansive, not too much, and the voice of the speaker—I’ll refer to him as “Mirskin”— is relaxed, curious, ample. The same can be said of the mind behind the voice. “Tight” is a quality that is often recommended in writing, and tight of course is good, but loose can also be a virtue, in the right hands. Maybe loose isn’t the right word. I do not doubt that these poems were hard to write; there is certainly great skill behind them. Maybe they were cut from longer drafts—only the poet knows. But they feel free and easy. They flow with poise and nonchalance. They have a quality that we like to call—slippery word—natural.

Stream of consciousness? Maybe—but it seems more purposeful than that.
It’s like a diver who leaps, improvises a flip and a twist, and then slips smoothly into the water. It feels spontaneous, yet it feels like control. Isn’t that what we are after, not only in poetry but in life—control that feels spontaneous? Sometimes Mirskin’s shifts of thought can make him seem to have a touch of Attention Deficit Disorder. I guess in the image of the diver I am remembering the story of Jung’s response when someone asked him what the difference was between his patients’ disjointed mental states and James Joyce’s stream of consciousness writing. Jung replied: They are falling; he is diving. On a smaller scale, that comment may be appropriate for Mirskin.

For example, the poem “Mike.” As the title would suggest, it’s a character study. But first, we learn that “In New York State freezing is about forty-two inches.” That’s line one. Line two is an explanation: “That’s how far you have to dig if you’re putting in a foundation.” Mirskin has done some shovel work, and he talks about that experience for a while. The subject of the poem is still a dozen or so lines off. Meanwhile, Mirskin’s observations on digging are interesting. The time he dug a grave for a calf. The time he found a row of horse teeth, but it turned out that what he found wasn’t horse teeth, but the rows of keys from an adding machine: “They’d been in the ground for some time, but I had a feeling / they could still add.”

Working construction was a summer job for Mirskin, but for others it’s their profession, and one of those guys, Mike, now steps into the poem that he is the subject of. Though he’s a master carpenter and the foreman on the project, he stops and helps Mirskin with the digging. Young at the time, Mirskin didn’t fully appreciate the generosity of the act. As he says in one of the instances of oddly formal diction that crop up here and there, “I wasn’t assuaged.” Even if he was the young guy on the job, it didn’t seem quite fair to him that he was the one working in the hole with a shovel out in the sun on a hot day. But as the poem unfolds, we understand that later he will appreciate Mike’s magnanimity, and the unfolding of that awareness is, you could say, the poetry of the poem. Here and throughout the book, there’s something extraordinarily graceful in Mirskin’s shuttling back and forth in time, his considerations of consciousness then and now.

We learn more about Mike: His relationship with his wife, a former motorcycle cage driver in a circus. We hear the story of Mike’s driving twenty hours at night to propose to her, and rescue her from her dangerous job. It’s a good story; an act of passion that changed two lives. There are other details: How Mike would stop on the way home from work to take a nap in order to have more energy for love-making when he got home. Something that a young guy would remember.

Mirskin already knew that much before Mike stepped into the hole with him. “I knew a little bit about him,” he says, in one of his laconic explanations. But now they stop to take a drink of water, and Mike starts talking about another part of his life: the death of his father, five years earlier. He talks about the regret he feels that his father will never see how well he’s doing, in his work and in his marriage. And Mike makes an extreme statement: he would be willing to work five years digging without pay, if he could see his father for five minutes. Maybe it’s an exaggeration,
but it impresses the young Mirskin:

I tried to picture that meeting. The meeting that couldn’t happen.
The truth was as flat and hot as the face of a shovel.
For a moment there was quiet. There was sadness, but it felt peaceful.
After a while, Mike went back into the house, and I went back to digging.
Back to the girl in the cage. Back to driving all night long on the highway.

There’s music here: the echoes among the two-syllable words—happen, shovel, sadness, peaceful; a run of assonance—tried, quiet, while, highway. Such music is often stitched into the easy flow of the poems. And the poem ends there, in that reverie in the hole.

The key word is “moment.” Mirskin has a way of digging up a moment and contemplating it, turning it in his hand, like the horse teeth that turned out to be the keys of an adding machine. “I had a feeling they could still add . . . .” Sometimes he thinks explicitly about the meaning of the whole phenomenon of moments themselves. For example, the poem “Carvel Superman” is about an incident in which his father almost did something violent, but caught himself and didn’t. Mirskin comments, “We know now that memory holds events, especially traumatic ones / in image, until those images can find resolution / in narrative expression.” He offers bits of commentary like this now and then, here and there. He slips them in. In the poem about having lunch in the Indian restaurant, he catches himself daydreaming about the future, about how his son might someday be a successful entrepreneur and have restaurants of his own, a whole chain of them. Then he pulls back into the present: “But this is now. And now is that selfish moment dedicated to itself.” So, he is a bit of a philosopher about time. But primarily what he does is evoke and describe.

Sometimes the moments are in small constellations. In the poem about his uncle, three moments orbit one another. Also three people: Mirskin, his uncle, and his father. At the uncle’s funeral, the father was called on to speak about his brother. He struggled with it. He mentioned the time they went to a baseball game together, and they saw Joe DiMaggio hit two home runs. A memory for the ages, between two brothers. Then: “He hesitated, as if trying to find a few more words. Nothing. / Then eventually he said, ‘I liked him,’ and took a small step back.” At first, Mirskin wasn’t sure whether his father was referring to DiMaggio or his brother. Then he realized that it was his brother, and “I liked him” were the final summarizing words of the eulogy, what he could come up with, where he had to stop.

Mirskin experienced a similar moment of not knowing what to say when he called his uncle to thank him for the five hundred dollars.

When I called, I told him I wanted to thank him.
He didn’t say anything.
I said it was a surprise. I listened, waiting for a response
wondering if there were something else I could say.
That’s the hard part: knowing what to say.
"I liked him" was actually a good thing to say, when you don’t know what to say. Taken together with that small step backward of not being able to say more, it’s not bad, as a tribute, as a simple expression of grief. And I would suggest that the poem has something like that simplicity, and that stepping back. The simplest expression of loss, followed by a step backward into knowing that words are not going to do the job—though in this case, in the case of a good poem, they do:

Thank you, Uncle George, I said. I love you.  
And before I hung up, and then for some time after, it seemed  
my uncle and I were dwelling together in a timeless place.  
A different place. Not this one.

At the funeral and in the poem, it feels the same. Words, perhaps the simplest, then silence. What you can say, then what you can’t.

I feel awkward walking through the poems like this, pointing out effects, because as much as any poems I can think of, these seem to explain themselves. I’m not sure if it is respectable to quote from a book’s blurs, but here is one from the back cover:

I love this collection of poems. They are easy and fun to read, yet challenge me to think creatively in order to understand the deeper meanings within. Reflections of wisdom, joy, thankfulness, sadness, enlightenment, redemption, and a common thread throughout of benevolent good nature and humor inform these wonderfully crafted poetic stories about family, place and happenings. Without trying, they inspire me to live life more fully and perceptively, and to experience the magic and spirit in everyday things. This is a collection that I’ll enjoy reading often.

Well, yes—right on every count. The author of the comment is Hank Roberts, who is identified as, “Musician.” Which is to say, I suppose, he’s not a literary specialist. Which is to say, the poems are accessible. To me, accessible is a good thing—a victory for poetry. Not everyone agrees. I don’t always agree myself. "Easy" is a controversial word; “easy and fun to read,” maybe more so. There’s a case to be made for density and difficulty. They can be wonderful poetic qualities. The joy of Hopkins comes through them, and the pleasure of Eliot. But Mirskin’s kind of easy is a subtle thing, and it involves no sacrifice of richness, of texture or thought.

Writing criticism, writing about art, one has certain standards, presumably high. And those standards should have some objective validity. But, it isn’t so simple. The process of reading and evaluating is always more subjective than that. Any reader responds not only to the crafted work, but also to where the artist is coming from, not just the place, but the ground of experience itself. And if one is from there too, there’s another dimension of communication, and an influence on appreciation. So I need to acknowledge that I went to high school with Mirskin,
Jerry Mirskin

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— M. G.

and that we were in the same Spanish class in ninth grade.

Not really. But reading the poem “Ninth,” I feel as if we were. It is a pitch-perfect and hilariously accurate description of what I remember. If I have to disclaim objectivity, I can at least vouch for the accuracy of his description of the experience of high school—also, of adolescent male consciousness. Which of course includes a lot of unconsciousness. As the poem puts it: “It was ninth grade. A Spanish class. I know that. / Though a lot of what you’re doing at that time is unknown.”

In the outer world of the class, the teacher gives the students Spanish names. Ray becomes Raymundo, Jerry becomes Jeronimo. For me, this is one of those especially vivid details. Apparently there isn’t a Spanish equivalent of Howard. I became—I had no choice in the matter—Pepe. I didn’t like being called Pepe. It didn’t do anything for my ninth grade sense of dignity, or whatever confidence, not to say machismo, I might have been nurturing. Something like Jeronimo would have been at least a little bit better. So I go for a moment into my own memory; then back to the poem.

Inwardly, what was happening was a very low level of comprehension of the purpose of being in school, combined with adolescent sexual frenzy. Mirskin says,

The names were part of a masquerade that complemented our immaturity. In another era, we would’ve been learning something like how to milk a cow, or how to saw a board. But there we were sitting in a room, buzzing with boy energy. I don’t remember a lot but I remember the other kids were acting like idiots.

Stoking the boy energy was the fact that the teacher was young and pretty:
When Miss Nassberg turned to write on the board, the sight of her legs exploded in our immature brains and sent waves of hysteria across the room. Every time she turned: compressed lunacy. Idiots.

Idiot is a nice, vivid word, right at home in the milieu he’s describing.

Another word that has a similar vernacular tang is “typical,” and Mirskin employs it like a skilled musician:

...for the most part she put up with us and smiled
and laughed off our behavior as typical. I was ok with being typical
but there was one time when I went a little further.

The rest of the poem describes that time. Apparently there was a time when people left their cars unlocked in parking lots, and the ninth grade Mirskin decides it would be a great idea to sneak into Miss Nassberg’s car and, after she’s driven a ways down the road, surprise her. It would be a good way to ingratiate himself to her, to get closer to her... It is a wonderful scene, the word idiot coming in again beautifully at the end.

“Idiot” and “typical” are part of the colloquial ring I spoke about. They are of a certain time and place. They’re still used, I guess, but they stick in the mind as remnants of childhood. “The nick of time” is another example. Mirskin says, “The nick of time was a big concept back then.” Product names have similar specificity, part of a dialect, a vocabulary. For example, Twinkies, originally made by the Hostess Baking Company, which also contributed Wonder Bread and Hostess Cupcakes. Twinkies, the shelf life of which was thought to be forever, but testing showed it to be forty-five days. I’m not sure how local, regional, or universal such words and their associations are—in the case of Twinkies in America, probably quite universal. In any case, Mirskin takes pleasure in such references, and it’s probably safe to say that no one has written a better poem about Twinkies than he has. The same poem also refers to Bactine, and it is a little uncomfortable having that product, for the treatment of pimples, in close proximity to those cream-filled cakes. But the Twinkies have other associations, especially sexual: “When I see those golden smiles smug in their cellophane cells / I’m reminded of the summer I tried to liberate my first girlfriend / from the silky pockets of her teenage bra.” Later he describes the Twinkies as “cream-filled mummies in their cellular chambers,” “blonde Nefertitis,” “glycemic mice”—all examples of the extravagance I spoke of earlier.

There’s an element of the class clown in the poems about high school and Twinkies, but I don’t want to isolate or exaggerate it. Mirskin’s playfulness is blended with and balanced by his seriousness and compassion. A good example of his serious side is the poem “Comfortable,” about a therapist with whom Mirskin worked, who helped him with depression. The therapist had his own demons, and ultimately died from an overdose. The account of the interaction between therapist and patient, hours of talk compressed into a dozen lines, is an example of Mirskin’s ability to summarize complex situations. I’ve mentioned
Books by Jerry Mirskin

**PICTURE A GATE HANGING OPEN AND LET THAT GATE BE THE SUN**

**IN FLAGRANTE DELICTO**
DuBois, Pa.: Mammoth Books, 2008. $11.95 (pa.)

**CREPUSCULAR NON DRIVEWAY**

— M.G.

his rambling, wandering aspect, but he also has a terrific ability for rich phrasings and strokes of imagery.

I continued seeing him. I had more to talk about.
He said he was not afraid of death.
I guess I got my money’s worth with that one.
Come on! I wanted to say, Use your imagination... His lack of fear made me determined to call the unfathomable into the room, though most of the time in the glare of the afternoon light, I couldn’t conjure it. I couldn’t draw the dark gnaw of endlessness into the small theater of a single day. Sure, he said, it was sad, but there is beauty in sadness. I thought of a poem I knew. I understood how life was precious by being finite, but that didn’t solve my problem. I wasn’t talking about sad. What I knew was dark and deep, but if he couldn’t see it, couldn’t fathom the stall I was kicking in, how could he help me? He’d sit quietly, listening.

“Call the unfathomable into the room.” “Dark gnaw.” “Small theater.” “The stall I was kicking in.” These are the kind of vivid phrases that one finds in Mirskin’s casual narratives.

Why do people who aren’t Buddhists like to have statues of Buddha around? The therapist had one in his backyard, along with a fish pond, and he and Mirskin sometimes had their sessions out there. It must have to do with calm. The Buddha’s calm, the statue’s calm— they give us some hope for calm of our own. As Mirskin puts it:

There was a little figure of a Buddha that seemed to oversee the whole scene
eyes half-open, half-closed. Legs crossed
in that way that suggests all you have to do
is fold your body properly and like Origami
it will all be ok.

After the therapist’s death, one of his clients claims the Buddha statue,
without permission—just goes into the backyard and takes it. Hearing about
this, Mirskin is upset, but then he collects himself into the poem’s remarkable
ending:

I was shocked when I heard that. The words, “vulture,”
came to mind, “Ransack.” But what did I know?
I remember sitting in the garden with him.
I saw how much pleasure it gave him to share the calm
of the place. Now he was gone.
The Buddha was gone from his garden.
“Stolen,” I thought. And then I thought about it.
It felt right. Absence. That math makes sense.
It’s presence that’s a problem.

Calm? Grief? Emptiness? Or something that combines them? There is consolation
in Mirskin’s way of formulating it. Again and again, Mirskin knows what to say at
the end of a poem. Say enough, and not more. Know when to take the step back.
He’s not a Zen master, but he is a master of endings.

Throughout the book, Mirskin honors relationships, and offers subtle
praise of other people as they fulfill their various roles in life. The therapist,
Miss Nassberg, his uncle—they all deserve praise, and the poems give it. There
are others, notably poems about his father and mother: “Carvel Superman,”
“Because,” “Setting the House on Fire.” I don’t know how many poems there
are about bar mitzvahs, but Mirskin has a beauty about his, “Two Days,” and
it contains a sketch of the officiating rabbi that is both wry and a gesture of
appreciation. Several years after the ceremony, Mirskin runs into the rabbi again.
He says hello. They shake hands:

When I introduced myself he was genuinely pleased, and we chatted
for a moment.
Before he continued on his walk, he took my hand a second time
and thanked me for saying hello. It was one of those moments.
One of those moments in which you sense that everything you thought
about the world was wrong.
It was summer.
Cars and kids playing could be heard through the neighborhood.
A slight breeze rustled in the trees.
The world was quietly sleeping, quietly awake.

There’s that word “moment” again.
Mirskin shifts from Twinkies to a higher quality of baked goods in "Whitman at the Bakery"—a poem that deserves to stand next to Allen Ginsberg’s "A Supermarket in California," both as a tribute to Whitman and as a description of what it might mean to have him as a teacher. Once again, there are sexual associations with the bakery products, but on its way to the girl behind the counter at the bakery, the poem contemplates Whitman. For those who feel Whitman's gravitational pull, he is the great absorber, and the poet of connection—with human beings and, in some great and immediate way, with the universe itself. At the same time, all the connection with life is based in a profound awareness of death. "A child said What is the grass?... And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves." "If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles."

Mirskin's description of his Whitmanesque feelings is marvelous. "I toured the illiterate streets of evening, imagining I was part / of a larger walk." He says: "Thinking I was a little like Whitman / I walked the neighborhoods, wanting to understand / how he was carrying his death." And in response to these imaginings and questionings, his metaphors turn almost zany. Again, those touches of extravagance. The boundary where the zany meets the beautiful is one that Mirskin walks very well. He leans this way and that; he keeps his balance.

I imagined him socking his fist
into the thick mitt of it, like a catcher beckoning mortality
to pitch its sinker, reckon its curve, squatting behind home plate
taking reality to ground level.
At night, after a long day of mortal play
I imagined he rested his head on the pillow of his grave.
I tried to be like that.
I don't know if I was catcher—waiting for death to slide in
and spike me in the thigh.
I was more like one of those skaters that passes
while you're making awkward rounds around the rink,
the one that glances over as he sails by.

The skater catches another element in Mirskin's tone. As he says, "I was not as resolute as Whitman." The choice of the word "resolute" is brilliant—unexpected and exactly right. No blame either way; just an acknowledgement. Resolute? Well, there is a certain insistent quality in Whitman; even when he's leaning and loafing, he tells you, "what I assume you shall assume." And he's not notable for his sense of humor. So Mirskin's catcher image for Whitman is not only wildly fresh, it's also accurate. As for the skater, that image is both fresh and true as well. There's a skating, floating quality in his own personality. It might be irony, though it doesn't make him cynical or bitter. It's a gentle form of irony.

Earlier I compared him to a diver. He is both skater and diver. In a poem about giving a reading, which might be the best poem ever written on that subject, he
compares himself to the water about to go over Niagara Falls.

At the poetry reading, I stood at the podium
looking out over the crowd. I probably shouldn’t say crowd.
There might have been twenty people in between the shelves
in the back of an old bookstore in Buffalo
[. . . .]
they were sitting, and it felt like I was peering out at them.
Sort of how water at the top of the falls looks out over the edge
and contemplates that long going over. It was like that.

And then there is the comparison between himself and Whitman, similarity and
difference. So while we’re talking in comparisons as a way to describe this poet
whom I have difficulty adequately describing, I’ll try one more, to a different sort
of poetry entirely.

An odd thing happened a year or so ago. Within two or three months, I
received letters from five poet friends, none of whom knows the others, all of them
saying, “I’ve been writing haiku lately.” Probably it had something to do with the
stages of life: all of these poets are sixty or older. Maybe a yearning to say it all
in a few words sets in as we grow older—though none of them was satisfied with
a single haiku. That would be conciseness beyond almost any poet. They were all
working on sequences, maybe a hundred or so haiku.

I understand the impulse. I love it when someone catches the splash of the
frog in the pond, and it seems to sketch eternity. Fragmentary and whole. Solid and
evanescence.

The number of syllables is important. I don’t mean to downplay it. The 500
syllable haiku? The twelve-sided triangle. But it seems to me that the moment is
the most important thing, in its elliptical wholeness.

It was around the same time that I was hearing from my haiku-writing
friends that Crepuscular Non Driveway arrived. I can’t prove it, but I think
that in Mirskin’s poems, for all their pleasures, reflections, jackknives, and
digressions, moments are made whole again, as in a great haiku—like the moon
floating in the trees. And the voice in the poems is calm and sane, eloquent and
unassuming.

— Howard Nelson

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