

Classic Poetry Series

Ronald Koertge
- poems -

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Ronald Koertge(1940)

Ron Koertge was born in Olney, Illinois, April 22, 1940

Ronald Koertge is the author of poetry collections like Dairy Cows, Life on the Edge of the Continent: Selected Poems, and Making Love to Roget's Wife (University of Arkansas Press).

He has also written a novel, The Boogeyman, a lot of young adult novels, including Arizona Kid, Mariposa Blues, Tiger, Tiger, Burning Bright, and Confess-O-Rama.

Koertge recently retired from Pasadena City College after 37 years of teaching.

An Infinite Number Of Monkeys

After all the Shakespeare, the book
of poems they type is the saddest
in history.

But before they can finish it,
they have to wait for that Someone
who is always

looking to look away. Only then
can they strike the million
keys that spell

humiliation and grief, which are
the great subjects of Monkey
Literature

and not, as some people still
believe, the banana
and the tire.

Ronald Koertge

Body Shop

When I come in, my mechanic is eating
lunch. He doesn't look over the top
of his newspaper.

I glance around, hoping that Miss July
with her sassy fife will distract me,
but his calendars
feature only a vernal wrench, saucy
timing belt, naked carburetor:
things that might make a robot humid.
Sitting across from his headlines, I feel
like the mechanic's wife: virtues ignored,
faults magnified, taken for granted . . .
It's all I can do to not clutch
the lapels of my robe and run into
the bathroom weeping.
Finally he listens. Intently. Leaning closer,
one hand on my trembling manifold.

Ronald Koertge

Burning The Book

The anthology of love poems I bought
for a quarter is brittle, anyway, and comes
apart when I read it.

One at a time, I throw pages on the fire
and watch smoke make its way up
and out.

I'm almost to the index when I hear
a murmuring in the street. My neighbors
are watching it snow.

I put on my blue jacket and join them.
We like each other and push each other
away.

The children stand with their mouths
open.

I can see nouns - longing, rapture, bliss -
land on every tongue, then disappear.

Ronald Koertge

Fault

In the airport bar, I tell my mother not to worry.
No one ever tripped and fell into the San Andreas
Fault. But as she dabs at her dry eyes, I remember
those old movies where the earth does open.

There's always one blonde entomologist, four
deceitful explorers, and a pilot who's good-looking
but not smart enough to take off his leather jacket
in the jungle.

Still, he and Dr. Cutie Bug are the only ones
who survive the spectacular quake because
they spent their time making plans to go back
to the Mid-West and live near his parents

while the others wanted to steal the gold and ivory
then move to Los Angeles where they would rarely
call their mothers and almost never fly home
and when they did for only a few days at a time.

Ronald Koertge

Fever

Delores Del Rio takes a walking tour
of my body. Unlike most vagabonds
in sturdy boots and a stained rucksack,
Delores wears a red dress and slingbacks.
She hums the arsonist's theme
as she taps one coy organ after another
and makes them tawdry with flame.
When she gets a little tired,
she sits on my spleen and smokes.
If she glanced up, she'd see
two aspirin careening toward her
like the lights of a very small car
destined to disappear in a fiery crash.

Ronald Koertge

Grand Avenue

When the Lexus hit that pigeon, he lay there
beating his one good wing against the curb
like he was trying to put out a fire.

My wife asked me to do something, so I
turned his head clockwise until I heard
a click. Then darkness poured out
of the small safe of his body.

That is when I realized I used to
merely love my wife.

Now I would kill for her.

Ronald Koertge

Little Morning Serenade

Bamboo shoots in a blue pot, tea steeping
in a tall cup with painted koi on the side.
Outside my window, the cat stalks a sparrow,
but is too tender-hearted to lunge.
Even with your hastily scrawled note still
on the table, it is hard for me to believe
you are the woman in that poem who made
love to her husband again and again so he
would sleep deeply and she could slip
away to meet the young fisherman barefoot
in pure, sweet water, the lures he is famous
for pinned to his open shirt.

Ronald Koertge

Ornithology

Walking toward the library, I pass three children
staring down at a dead crow and daring each other
to poke it with a stick.

I stop, too, because I know a little about crows -
how, for instance, they are different from ravens.

I could tell these well-dressed children that:

ravens are black with purple tint while crows
are denied that royal hue. A crow's tale is squared-off
like the crew-cut on the boy at Menchie's who hands
them the expensive frozen yogurt
while a raven's tale is triangular, a shape discovered
by the Persians and beloved by the 17th century
mathematician Blaise Pascal. Furthermore, ravens
love solitude and prefer remote hills and woods
while a crow will perch on a stop sign and brag
about it endlessly.

But that isn't what they are concerned about.

They want to know about Death. And for that
I would have to fetch the skull from my desktop
and ask the sun to hide its face behind a dark,
galleon-shaped cloud and then -

Oh, wait. They're offering me the stick. All
they really want to know is will I poke the corpse.

Of course. And when I do and it moves, they
run away shrieking and delighted. More alive,
if possible, than before.

Ronald Koertge

Poetry Begins In Delight

"That panting on the wall"
really was the most interesting line
in the whole magazine.

But my pleasure in it was diminished
by the abject apology in the next issue:
Apparently the poet is still lying down
due to the typo that turned painting
into panting.

My disappointment was offset though
by a new poet who went on and on
about the waning light across harrowed
fields and the long shadows of cedar
and pine until finally everything
was "covered by dorkness."

Ronald Koertge

Poets Vs. Wildcats

Coach entreats us to control the clock.
But how can one not ponder "time's winged
chariot," or "Time the foe of Man's dominion"?
Pondering leads to delay of game.
Naturally we read the defense.
But the sub-text is slippery. Our feminist
tight end accuses the entire offense
of phallocentrism. During the lively
debate, visitors score again.
Our quarterback refuses to use brutal
spondees, so the center hikes when
he feels inspired. More penalties.
The wide receiver broods near the sidelines.
Even when open he is likely to stop
and record in his journal the sun off those
tubas, the ball falling toward him out
of the blue apron of the sky.

Ronald Koertge

Roadside Creche

Traditionally, Gaspar, Melchoir and Balthasar show up with their exotic gifts, though the Bible does not name them and some scholars believe the Chinese sage Liu Shang might have attended with a gift of silk rather than myrrh. Or even better - fireworks. The Christ child's missing fingers suggest he already has some experience with cherry bombs or Red Devil Ground Blasters. In this crèche, though, the magi have yet to arrive. There are no camels, just a plaster zebra peering over Mary's shoulder. Joseph must have stepped out for milk or cigarettes. The weight of adoration has fallen onto the shoulders of a single, scowling shepherd with binoculars slung around his neck. He is still keeping watch over his flock despite that mischievous star that lured him from his tranquil hillside and utterly bewildered dog.

Ronald Koertge

Sidekicks

They were never handsome and often came
with a hormone imbalance manifested by corpulence,
a yodel of a voice or ears big as kidneys.

But each was brave. More than once a sidekick
has thrown himself in front of our hero in order
to receive the bullet or blow meant for that
perfect face and body.

Thankfully, heroes never die in movies and leave
the sidekick alone. He would not stand for it.
Gabby or Pat, Pancho or Andy remind us of a part
of ourselves,

the dependent part that can never grow up,
the part that is painfully eager to please,
always wants a hug and never gets enough.

Who could sit in a darkened theatre, listen
to the organ music and watch the best
of ourselves lowered into the ground while
the rest stood up there, tears pouring off
that enormous nose.

Ronald Koertge

Sky Burial

Q. You're Such a Disciplined Writer. Were You Always That way?

A. When I was in graduate school, I worked part-time at a local library. I ran the used bookstore in the basement. The money came in handy. There was plenty of time to study.

I learned to know the regulars who talked about living with pain and waiting for bland meals to be delivered.

One sweltering afternoon I read about Tibetan body breakers who dismember corpses with their hatchets and flaying knives so the vultures will have an easier time.

I imagined my own body and the monks asking, "What did this one do?" And the answer would be, "Not much." As the hand I could

have written with flew away from the wrist.

Ronald Koertge

The Streetsweeper

goes by at 1:00 a.m. two nights of the week. I can
hear the feather whoosh of his machine and see
one red light.

I believe that the streetsweeper lives alone,
 sleeping
through the cold days, waking clear-eyed and deft
as the sun goes down.

I believe that he works steadily without a portable
radio or a reading light or a nap. When he pauses
it is to stare placidly into
the potent night.

For reasons too numerous to mention, I think
 about the
streetsweeper often and about the singular,
 provident
cadence of his life.

Ronald Koertge

The Trojan Pony

It is small, holds only a few boys and girls
and smells like graham crackers inside.
There it sits one morning shining in the sun.
A giant toy. Beyond inviting. Irresistible.
The Trojan children haul it around back.
They make their toy ponies rear and whinny
and eventually kneel. They do this until nap
time, then drink juice and stretch out in the sun.
Pretty soon the Greek children emerge.
"We win! they shout standing over the Trojans
who look pleased and surprised. A blonde girl
timidly offers half a cookie and the victor
gobbles it up even as he continues to
brandish his enormous cardboard sword.

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