Ronald Koertge
- poems -

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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
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 a 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
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
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.
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.

Ronald Koertge