Poet Ron Koertge's Absurd Divination

I first found Ron Koertge in Edward Field's *A Geography of American Poets*, which was published in 1979. I fell for the way he loved language, the way he could tell a story in a poem and print a photograph on your memory.

*Making Love to Roget's Wife* *(University of Arkansas Press, 1997)* is a collection of his poems, new and selected. This is what poetry should be: outrageous maps of actions that are impossible. Ron Koertge's poems are not pedestrian or pedantic. Woe is not a large part of his poems, although he writes seriously. Humor is one of the names of his game.

I have been penpals with Ron for some time, and this interview was done by letter:

**What brought you to poetry writing?**

When I was in graduate school at the University of Arizona (1962-5) Gerry Locklin showed me some poems in a magazine that either was *The Wormwood Review* or was certainly like *The Wormwood Review*. That sort of sassy, dirty, iconoclastic poem really appealed to me compared to the devotional pageantry of graduate school. Because Gerry and a few other guys in the graduate program were writing poetry, I thought I'd try my hand at it, too: poetry buddies instead of golfing buddies. The dominant style of the little mags in those days was easy going - versus the virtuosic, let's say, and that played right into what I could do, i.e., talk and show off.

There is a sense of humor in your poetry that is often taken to an absurd degree. Were you told as a child that you went too far, and found the page a safe place to retreat with your imagination?

I was told (and am told) that I go too far, which only makes me want
more people to say that louder. I'm not so sure, though, that the page is a retreat; it's more a place to escape the curfew and spend some quality time with what I think of as the Florida of my mind. I know that things in my poems seem absurd - the penis tongs, "12 Photographs of Yellowstone" - but they don't seem that absurd to me as I'm writing. I'm not thinking, "Boy, am I zany today!" I just set up a premise and follow it, like those little guys walking great big dogs.

**Did you abandon writing fiction for adults at some point, or is the world just not ready for that yet?**

Fiction for adults abandoned me right after The Boogeyman came out in the early 80's. It's a pretty good grown-up novel, as those things go, but the next two that I wrote were failures. When the Verisimilitude Inspector came around, he just laughed. So I was at one of those low points we all hit when a friend of mine said that I should just forget about being a rich and famous novelist and try my hand at kids' fiction: I could write in first person, and I could be a smarty pants. Who could resist an offer like that?

**What writers led you up the ladder to your voice? Who do you admire in the big name game these days?**

I like the idea of being led up the ladder to my voice. ("What's that on the roof? I thought it was a Frisbee, but it's Ron's voice! Will he be happy to see this!") Seriously, folks, the blame falls on Edward Field. He has always written a bout pop icons and I remember reading his early books with great delight and a sense of liberation: Poetry didn't have to be serious. I didn't have to know classical myths or learn Babylonian. I could write about Tonto or Ozzie Nelson and use the loot of a normal life to finance the art of a normal life. As far as the big name game today, nobody can touch Billy Collins.

**What is your training in the realm of the traditional and your thoughts on such?**

Nearly all of my poems are free verse. A lot of people find the discipline of meter and/or rhyme inhibiting. My poetry students always say they can't write what they want in traditional forms. For me, though, it's not inhibition, it's difficulty. Using rhyme and meter well -- as someone like Tim Steele does -- is way too hard for me. It's not that I can't say what I want in ye olde forms. It's that I can barely say anything well.

I've never had any formal training in poetry at all. I'm basically self-taught. I've never taken a class in poetry writing or gone to a writer's conference. I've simply read a lot and had a lot of rejection slips. One summer, though, about twenty years ago, I wrote a sonnet a day every day for three months. The rule was that I couldn't do anything else -- go to the track, take in a movie, spend time with my
wife -- until I'd written a creditable sonnet. And I stuck to the rule. Most of the sonnets weren't very good, but at the end of the summer I was a different kind of writer. My lines weren't as lazy, the rhythms were less asperitous, the irony was less obvious, the whole poem was a more interesting instrument of divination.

-- Ron Koertge interviewed by Amy Halloran