

# Greg Kuzma

## *HIGH PLAINS DRIFTER:* *BOB KING'S OLD MAN LAUGHING*

When Bob King was an adjunct at UNL—his wife Beth Franklin was Chair of Curriculum and Instruction at Teachers' College—a few years back—they had come from North Dakota—and now Beth is at Greeley, and Bob has dutifully gone with her—(they are in love)—Bob and I would go each week to lunch at Bruegger's Bagels. Bob is a big man, and I am a smallish man, but my laugh is even louder than his laugh, and boy they must have heard us coming blocks away. Everything amused us, especially our own plights, our own—as Richard Howard's Oscar Wilde calls "virtuous obscurity"—and we would laugh the way only the unappreciated and invisible can laugh, with a reckless abandon bordering on the lunatic—what can they do to us now?—it's a free country!—as laughter is the last refuge before suicide or terminal self-pity thickens its molasses into bitterness. I thoroughly enjoyed these weekly trampoline festivals—they were good for the knee joints of the soul—and we got well-lubricated pushing Nobel Prize winners off the heap of snow we had become joint rulers of—eyeing each other the whole time for any hint of dereliction of disaffection. We stayed true to each other the whole way—like two fun-house mirrors warped on opposite sides of the passage, catching the unwary hero in our dazzling disarray of distortions.

Bob's *Old Man Laughing* proves that his laughter was deep as well as true, and goes on—a self-sustained momentum built from the bottom-up scraps and residues of anyone's garage after any old seventy years in the same house/body, proving that we become what we have both saved and discarded. And which might well be reconstructed after our inevitable disappearance into the blinding snows of history. His first poem here places the problem firmly on the shoulders of first appearances:

Since, as a child, I was happy  
as a child, I thought everyone  
was happy, including the grimy man  
who lived at the dump in a shack  
decorated with hubcaps, broken chairs  
by the door cheerfully facing out to a waste

of smoldering rubble and oily dirt...

Bishop's "Filling Station" comes to mind, though Bob's is less starkly black and white, more a reminiscence than a gallery Dust Bowl photograph. Bob's presence in his poems is inescapable and part of what makes them so companionable. His second poem in part one ("The Maps") opens with

On the wall of the coffee shop is a map of the world  
with all the countries coffee comes from brightly colored,  
and the names—Tanzania, Malawi, Tongo, Jamaica—  
in white letters bobbing just offshore  
on the blue-green sea.

I am again with Bob at Bruegger's, he with his big coffee and his sandwich, I with my veggie and iced tea, wondering where the joke will go or bob up next. Will he pursue the buoy image of the names? No.

In the bread store there must be a map of the world  
showing where various wheats and barleys arise  
and in the natural history museum a map of dinosaurs'  
buried locations...

In the hospital, there's a map where plagues are pins  
of blinking lights, and in the marriage store  
a map, with local inserts, showing where your future  
husband or wife now lives. There's also a map

you should understand, in the divorce store...

Bob's and Beth's marriage is the second for Bob (or third?...he was typically diffident about such things). The poem continues like this for a while, but then, like any good comedic routine, veers a bit, concentrates its focus, even as it admits jokes with their own home bases, then returns to its undercurrent foreboding to close with (I won't spoil it for you, as David Ansen likes to say in *Newsweek*, reviewing the holiday movie schedule).

In just two poems Bob establishes both his sunny innocence—almost a universal—and his wide-sweeping range around the world, which can be done over coffee or should be—thus confirming our friendship and many more such wherever Bob and Beth may go—this King of Mirth, monarch of all he surveys, he who puts

us all at ease with ourselves and our fears even, tucking us in for the long nights to come.

Bob gets out of the coffee shop in poem three (“West of Singapore”) and shows himself to be as entertaining behind the wheel of his car as he is wrestling with a tuna sandwich:

West of Ogalalla, I-80, by the feedlot,  
I lose the public classical music  
which, anyway, was getting me seasick  
with its lyrical swell and falling

and pass under a half-built bridge,  
the silent trucks, the cement mixer  
soundlessly rolling its round drum,  
while I seek an AM station.

“I never had it so bad,” the singer intones,  
and I punch on, finishing it myself:  
“and that ain’t good” or else “that’s good,”  
such songs balancing the way they think.

It’s another “Maps” poem—this time traveling himself in person, even as he punches in the time clock of the AM radio, and we can’t help but think it’s Billy Collins himself talking, calm and ridiculous, breezy and outrageous at the same time, saying the most exasperating things in the most understated tones—our ribcage buckles and our abs flex and ache. King is Collins but without the reputation always to be funny—which, after a while, must start to feel like a straitjacket. Bob is more free, he can be sour, he can be matter-of-fact, he can be earnest and plainspoken without the burden of having to be ironic:

I also think that what’s electric in the air  
is all our lives. Driving we escape into them  
again and again, pick up the pieces of ourselves  
we’ve denied...

This is some of the straight good analysis and observation that poetry can provide—the sort of brilliant candor one gets almost every night on Charlie Rose, the common knowledge that we’re all in this together and have much to share

towards some grand collective library of hints and allegations of ordinary insight.

"Aunts" is a poem that must be quoted nearly in its entirety to show the full 6-ring circus (six stanzas) ringmaster King can conjure up almost in one vast breath when he's given the floor and nobody wants him to stop:

I remember one aunt with long red hair  
who laughed, at least that one afternoon.  
The other, subject to some frailty I wasn't told,  
kept pillows on the phones to soften  
any potential intrusion. So who's to say

I don't remember the aunt who shot  
clay-pigeons from horseback in Cody's show,  
grit flying up, the smock-smock of the rifle?  
Or that I couldn't remember the aunt  
who wrote a long Victorian novel  
or the aunt who married Lot  
or felt afterward, she said, as if she had?

I remember the aunt with an aureole,  
the aunt with an aura, the aunt colored  
like an aurora with rings on her auricles  
who walked au naturel through the forests,  
leaves imprinting a network of lace on her flanks.

I remember the aunt who left no diary,  
the one who did, the one the diary was about.  
I remember the aunt who made night,  
and the aunt who put the stars to flight,  
the aunt who traveled into the darkness  
and the aunt who traveled with the darkness.

This is a romp. Bob getting giddy. Bob being himself. He's not always completely streamlined and economical. There's perhaps too much parallel structure here, too much framing for the images, but we come away aware of all the unexamined persons and aspects of words, and how sounds get pounded into ironwork as on an anvil and the mind a forge and the tongue a hammer and a calipers. Bob King delights even as he works hard. Poetry is not some shim-sham nor smoke

and mirrors but rather syntax building its own deliberations—words have mass and weight and worth and wit at once, and the poem can be a performance, a train of thought runaway with itself, powered by endless possibility.

“A History of Photography” is an album of assorted snapshots and wordshots, a good many unforgettable, once-in-a-lifetime unrepeatable events—our lives founded on the half-round miracles of pebbles tumbled in the river of time: “I inexplicably lean/ as if the earth were shifting under my feet,” and “grandparents ... regal people almost exhausted/ with style, forced to be still a long time,” and “all of us/ different chapters in the history of photography,” and “Tom Thumb wedding” photographers “lugged costumes for those days of strange pretend.” Strange pretend? Wonderful.

And I wonder—mother gone underground—  
at how strange and strong we've all been,  
told to stay until stones themselves  
are worn blank of anyone's name...

All these poems are from the “Old” section of the book. Other poems in the section are the unforgettable “Life Sciences”—a perfect fit of a title for a painfully poignant recollection—an early awareness on Bob's part that sometimes the grace of the effect comes from the hard-strict tension of physics—form and content, life and death, pain and joy, inextricably bound, bone to iron, and as Frost reminds us, fact and dream. More and more in the book the laughter gives way to a hard, unyielding substratum of loss and grief and loneliness—the work time works on us and on all we love—and so the book deepens and layers and anchors itself, as always the most healing laughter comes from the deepest wounds.

Part Two of the book is called “Man.” Its first poem, “From the Book of Rope,” presents various knots and how to distinguish among them as well as discusses their binding forces: “the square knot, a perfect binding/of two equal loops” and the sheetbend, which “hooks unequal partners,” and so on, both sustaining implicitly a marriage metaphor sparked from the very first line—“First there is love”—which is both pre-condition as well as question (as in Plath's “Morning Song”). The poem ends sadly, presenting a foreboding as we enter this section of the book, which turns out to be about love and marriage, what binds, what holds, and what can't bind or hold:

In the book of rope, three tests  
for every knot: Is it easy to tie?

Will it stay tied firmly? And  
finally, will it be easy to untie?  
Which knots have we chosen?  
What else sadly should we know?

With my tenderfoot background I am suddenly ten years old again and in a home whose knots are starting to come undone. Even as I learned the ropes and those knots, some remnant lost skill from some more-physical world, my helplessness increased, as Bob's does here in this retelling of lost relics of know-how poised against terrifying disconnections. Two poems later his metaphor changes dramatically ("Marriage Fire").

When our marriage burned up  
and then down, drifts of deception  
under the doors almost smothering us  
and ending with a crackling anger  
scorching whatever we'd papered over  
until we both went aflame ourselves...

I cannot imagine a more candid admission nor a more painful one. Knowing Bob for so many years, I was surprised he had never shown me this poem, and so it comes to me like the dark side of the moon, the blank face on the flip side of laughter's raucous tail feathers. In the second stanza, ringmaster King douses the flames with his gaudy clowns:

Our friends came as clown-firemen,  
scrambling out of a little red truck,  
yelling and bumping into each other,  
falling down with their big shoes in the air,  
many dousing you with cool sympathy,  
a few rolling me roughly in a blanket.

Each word is telling, each revealing, in a poem whose figures have fought long and hard between each other to find what words there might be adequate to the disaster. As with all poets, some subjects come almost too close for comfort, strike too near the bone, and as here the writing has a surgical precision learned presumably through the disciplines of failure and loss. In "Playing," the metaphor transmutes itself again; such disasters yield to hundreds of metaphors—for everything done

well there is that thing impaired:

One year it was bridge,  
all Sunday, and one year  
infidelity. You have to pay  
attention to play bridge.  
Things add up, Dummy,  
my will wandered off...

The short line offers many painful turns; seemingly there is less and less to say. In the next poem the subject remains the same, but the metaphor goes searching the kitchen cabinets for new terms of expression. "Shelf Life" is, for me, the most awful of the lot. I am myself a cook, having learned it from my mother, who is an even finer cook—even as she left my father and destroyed our family, she remained her own best provider. Bob's poem hurts me so much I can hardly read it. So let me move on to the follow-up poem, "Sadnesses":

His sadness is a mile wide and an inch deep.  
It hollows out banks beneath the edge of cornfields,  
the stalks toppling like dazed obedient soldiers.

Her sadness is silver broken over rocks in sunlight,  
cascading off granite cliffs, dashing itself into pieces.  
She has become a national park of beautiful grief.

Bob pushes the ten-syllable line to brim up and out over into sentences painfully long—the way a penitential sentence must feel—once begun they must be served—and I, wary as I am of this book now in Part Two, begin them with fear and reluctance. And yet they have a merciful finality about them—the truths carried in their metaphors are weights of burden borne over the long march towards acceptance and a fuller comprehension—and yes, even towards forgiveness:

Mine has disappeared into a field. One day I was sad,  
the next I wasn't...

Around pages 38 and 39, the poems turn to new marriage and its joys, new love, new hopes, new opportunities, a fresh fervor of fun, and the world turns from relentless gloom and punishment to the happy accidents a happy heart discovers or reads into any haphazard event. "Accidentals" sounds again like that Bob King at the

bagel factory:

I've bought a wrong book to read  
at the sidewalk café, mistaking  
one Takahashi for another,

Matsuo for Shinkichi, so it's  
an accident. At the corner,  
a taxi toots at a dozing car.

Shinkichi, who said once, as a cloud,  
"I'm cheerful, whatever happens"  
would not honk, but Matsuo, who writes

a man's tongue "teems with cruel ants,"  
might honk viciously...

Despite the healing and annealing turnabout two-thirds of the way through Part Two, I am eager to plunge into Three, which is called, of course, "Laughing"—knowing myself how voracious these griefs can become once metastasized. Three begins with "What It's Like Now":

All my first young loves are now  
old women. Well. One by one

they write to me. I'm getting  
smaller, they say. Please forget.

All the poet sides of each of us begging to be remembered, all the people sides begging to be forgotten! The second poem in Three is for me the greatest poem in the book, not only for poets and language scholars but for all students of all the schools we struggle through as lifelong learners in the book of life. Here are its first 35 lines:

I love the words of the name red-winged black bird  
though my philosopher daughter tells me descriptions  
are not real names. And oh I know how the words fail,



turning bright blue prairie blossoms to Spiderwort  
a farmer calls Cow Slobber. And I know how lazy  
and local we get, talking of buffalo berry, buffalo bird,

buffalo grass, Indian grass or fig. Someone called it  
Indian bean, the broad catalpa, a tree I met in Kansas  
as a child, that place that means the wind, wind people,

south-wind people, a tree whose sound meant flowers,  
“head with wings,” in the round mouths of the Creek,  
a tree which is Bignonia, imagine, in New Latin, when

we wanted to be neutral as science and hence named  
a tree for Abbe Bignon, New Latin librarian  
to Louis XIV, hence honoring air again. “Te amo”

my 8<sup>th</sup> grade girlfriend’s friends dared Jayne to say  
which didn’t mean she loved me, since it was  
another language. Later, I took Latin and by now

Miss Hixon’s joined Marcus Aurelius who joined,  
as he knew he would, three men he names  
as learning from and of whom, a footnote says,

“nothing is known” and who, anyway, wrote in Greek  
or, for all we know, water. Or the air. Might as well  
be air, I’ve thought, language only a shape of lips.

In Mabel Hixon’s Latin class, Gene sat heavily  
beside me in his stained work-clothes, his face  
a laborious puzzle over the text, the rest of us

wondering why he read, why he was even there.  
At our 40<sup>th</sup> reunion, he turned out to own  
the county’s biggest truck farm, thank you,

planting food in Latin—a union of onions,  
the radical roots of the radish—and other tongues,  
tomat, batata, the ancient bha-bha of the bean,

the grains of corn gardeners first called maize,  
and the people ate the names and they were good...

This is amazing writing!

Bob King has never been a “professional” poet in the way we are forced to think of poets nowadays, tethered to institutions and writing programs all vying for attention, the best students they can get, all to draw in the moths with the money—but has, instead, like some tumbleweed or freeloader burr riding the High Plains winds of Kansas and North Dakota and Nebraska and now Colorado (he’s writing a prose book now about northern Colorado), setting down temporary roots—made vulnerable thereby—just enough to be nourished by the local and pained too from its circumstance—thence to be blown far and wide in his own restless, dizzying spin. He’s picked up many truths and griefs along the way, and now in his seventies with this book—really his first full gathering of his finest poems—comes to fruition and fulfillment without pretension or any investment in public image, no burden of plaudits, no uniform self-importance, just this roly-poly lunch companion at the bagel shop. His laughter intoxicates even as it is born from the depths of our collective darkness, and it purifies all it touches. I have not truly been well since we last broke bread together at Breugher’s, and this book makes me hunger for him all the more. His is what poetry needs to be, or always comes down to at the last, after all the systems and programs pen it and inoculate it against risk and error, the wit and play of the wild wind we ride and breathe to be so alive as this man.