

Outside Meaning and Inside Jokes: The Poetry of David Kirby

The very first thing I ever read by David Kirby was “I figure poetry is a way of beating the odds.” It’s the first sentence to his 1989 book, *Writing Poetry*, and it made me laugh out loud. Looking back, I realize there’s nothing funny about this sentence at all; it’s the declarative opening salvo in a pedagogical how-to book about writing. But, since I had been warned over and over that Kirby was funny as hell, perhaps I was poised—like a patron in some low-ceilinged comedy club, three drinks past the two-drink minimum—to laugh heartily at the first words to fall out of the headliner’s mouth. Or maybe this statement created within me a humorous incongruity, Kant’s notion that laughter arises “from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing,”¹ as it brought to mind my many dear poet friends who, by their own insistence, might not categorize their journey in poetry as “beating the odds” so much as being beaten *by* the odds, repeatedly and with great force. But what actually happened, I came to realize, was that Kirby and I were sharing our first inside joke, for the very first words I ever jotted down about David Kirby upon accepting this assignment were “I’m *taking a risk* here coming to poetry as an outsider.” With me “taking risks” and Kirby “beating odds,” I couldn’t help but laugh, thinking our time together might be better spent talking action with the neighborhood bookie rather than talking aesthetics in a poetry journal. Readers of *BPR* might ultimately arrive at a similar conclusion.

I have to be honest at this point and say that I don’t know the first thing about poetry, not in any technical sense at least.

1 Qtd. in John Morreall. *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1987.

I have certainly felt its force many times—a bodily sensation, mostly—arising from a deeply mystifying place bordering, frankly, on fear. Intellectually, however, what I know about enjambment and slant rhyme you could fit in a titmouse’s tacklebox. When it comes to poetry, I’ve always felt left outside of the joke—inadequate, somehow—and I always assumed it was just me. But in a 2011 interview, Kirby calls feelings of inclusion and exclusion surrounding contemporary poetry “a two-way problem” and indicts both a stubbornly idle poetry audience (“Saying ‘I don’t get poetry’ is like saying ‘I don’t like weather.’ There’s all kinds! Move to somewhere where the climate suits you”) and an often myopic poetry community intent on preserving its insiders-only clique of preciousness. “Poetry,” Kirby muses, “is the most wonderful and thrilling narcotic on the market today; it’s also some of the most godawful, humdrum crap you could possibly imagine [. . .] and there’s probably some editor out there who’ll print it because it’s so short.”² Poetry shares this “curse of economy” with another art form where brevity’s influence—on its creators, curators, and consumers—can cut with a double-edge: comedy.

The only reason I write to you in this context at all is because David Kirby is funny, and I write about funny things. As a rhetorician and humor theorist, I study language’s “asignifying force”—John Muckelbauer’s term for “the dimension of language [. . .] irreducible to questions of meaning or understanding”—which means I look for places where language *does* more than it *means*. Laughter exemplifies this force quite powerfully because of its vast array of rhetorical effects. At best, laughter provides an infections’ salve for relieving pain and elevating the spirit; at worst, as when being “laughed at,” it becomes a malevolent weapon, shaming and ridiculing its target, even if that target is the self. As a critic, however, laughter’s most valuable attribute may well be its ability—like poetry—to sidestep our rational control.³ We’ve

2 Tom C. Hunley. Interview with David Kirby. *Five Points*, vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 127–41.

3 A quality that leads Simon Critchley to classify humor as “a nicely impossible object for philosophy,” the others being music, film,

all experienced a time when we found ourselves laughing uncontrollably at something—a wittily structured yet slightly offensive joke, perhaps—before our frontal cortex finally catches on (always a step behind the rest of the body) and—face crimson with chagrin—steps in to say, “Hey there, self . . . I don’t laugh at things like that. That’s not *me*.” But if that’s not you laughing, who is it? *What* is it? Kirby’s humor probes these questions tirelessly across his canon; refreshingly, he doesn’t attempt to answer them.

Take, as an example, Kirby’s “The Elephant of the Sea,”⁴ a joke-inside-a-joke poem structured loosely around the three-part “AAB” joke structure. The first stanza introduces an attribute that the joke repeatedly modifies until the punchline’s incongruous divergence arrives in the final stanza. The setup mocks the mistakes made when foreigners transact tentatively in a language other than their own (Kirby’s narrator embodies an autobiographical presence here, an American intellectual abroad with his wife):

[. . .] in France sometimes I like to say
“Sylvia Plath” instead of “*s’il vous plaît*,”
as when I open the door for Barbara and say,
“*Après-vous*, Sylvia Plath!” But yesterday
the lady in the *boulangerie* asked me what I wanted,
and I said, “*Une baguette*, Sylvia Plath! Crap. . . .”

The inexact Sylvia Plath/*s’il vous plaît* homonym (and it’s the inexactness that creates the space for wit’s maneuvers) exemplifies the sort of sweet little pun that (happily) married couples spend their lives passing back and forth, but here it also serves to foreshadow the poem’s concerns about how we seek and arrive (or fail to arrive) at meaning.

When Kevin Clark notes that Kirby’s poetic “effect relies on an affect of deferring,” the comment appears—in context—to address how his poems’ form can seem “directionless at

and poetry.

4 Published first in *The Paris Review* and later in *The Ha-Ha* and *The House on Boulevard Street*.

first,” comfortable enough to amble—like Aragon’s surreal nightwalker, drifting in dream through the bygone Parisian arcades—before “resolving a theme we might not even realize has been in play.” But this sleight-of-hand maneuver would first have to assume that Kirby knows where he’s going all along and carefully obfuscates his journey’s path to better drive home the clarity of his destination, once arrived. But a more complicated process unfolds here, one where Kirby’s humor not only teases at our formal expectations of narrative but questions the very notions of “direction” and “arrival.” What would these poems reveal if we were to observe them ambling along their way—Clark’s “affect of deferring,” through a more radical eye, through the eye of *différance*, Derrida’s “‘productive,’ conflictual movement, which cannot be preceded by any identity, any unity, or any original simplicity, which cannot be ‘relieved’”?⁵ What if themes are not resolved? What if meaning is not achieved? What if Kirby uses humor not simply to heighten our satisfaction upon reaching the destination, the punchline, the resolution, but also as a destabilizing force that resists finitude at all stages of the journey, keeping meaning always moving, always effacing, always on its heels? Maybe the driver of the car *knows* he *doesn’t know* where he’s going; maybe that’s the point?

This line of inquiry begs a brief detour from “The Elephant of the Sea” to consider an aspect of Kirby’s poetry especially germane here: his writing is absolutely riddled with questions. Sometimes pithy, joyous in their innocent curiosity, other times profound, exemplifying Breton’s *l’humour noir* by sardonically shouldering the knowing weight of experience. Tracing a selection of these questions across his oeuvre, one notices a collective, metaphysical sense of humor with an epistemic edge, lampooning the very notion that we have the capacity to know much at all. A sampling: “What the hell do people want anyway?”; “Where the Fugawi? / And do we know, and do we want to know”; “How do you know / what to order when you don’t know what anything is?”;⁶ “And what

5 Jacques Derrida. *Dissemination*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981.

6 From “Someone Naked and Adorable”; “The Fugawi”; “Lame

would we do if we had The Knowledge?"; "Oh, *la verité, la verité*— / what in the whole ass-biting *qu'est-ce que c'est* / is *la verité* in the first place?"; "now there's only one good question, and that's "What the fuck?"; "Where is love? What is / the knowledge? Is it that there is no knowledge or is it / something more?";⁷ "if you're the one / who comes up with the answers, / then what the hell good are they?"; "What is a good or bad Jew? Or good or bad person, / for that matter? And who's to say";⁸ "One never / knows, do one?" [quoting Fats Waller].⁹ These relentless questions, each bearing traces of hope for an answer that never arrives, produce some of the most consistently comic and, ironically, comforting effects in all of Kirby's work. Because by destabilizing any notion that language's purpose—and in this case, poetry's intent—should be to provide wisdom and certainty, Kirby's long-running meta-joke at meaning's expense invites acceptance for everything we might never know and champions us to stand poised before that lack and *laugh*.

"The Elephant of the Sea" riffs on the translational pun of its opening across contexts of increasing absurdity. Back in America now, the narrator helps a French friend buy a car (inverting the foreigner/native positioning of the first stanza). When the Frenchman goes to the DMV, signifiers get lost in translation (the registration "tag" becomes a "matriculation," and the manatee on the endangered species Florida license plate becomes "*l'elephant de mer*"), such that he phrases his paperwork request: "I can have *zuh elephant of zuh sea* on my matriculation?" The attending clerk, with "this grin / on her face like she's either seeing God / or having an aneurysm," finds this unexpected break in her life's tedium transformative and inspires a delightfully imagined game of telephone to break out across the following five stanzas,

as a Robin" in *The Ha-Ha*.

7 From "The Knowledge"; "All Earthly Hues"; "Hello, I Must Be Going"; "The Mysteries" in *The Temple Gate Called Beautiful*.

8 From "Strip Poker"; "My Brother the Jew" in *The House on Boulevard Street*.

9 From "A Few Old Things" in *Get Up, Please*.

where the poor Frenchman's request takes on ever-increasing mythical eminence: the clerk can't wait to "tell the women she goes fishing with / on Lake Jackson about this foreign fellow, / nice as he could be, though," her uninterested husband ("Uh-huh! Any more of those potatoes?"), and "everyone at her fortieth class reunion / and her grandchildren and their children, too," until—taken to its radical end—she utters them to "Pastor Blair" on her deathbed: "And then this fellow says, 'I can have *zuh elephant of zuh sea*'—ah, glory!" Hearing the final words of this state employee somehow rouses Pastor Blair from his "divine stupidity," his ennui of personal faith, so much so that he continues carrying them forward,

[. . .] chang[ing]

the details as he works them into a story of his own

[. . .]

in endless retellings

which are in turn picked up by others who incorporate them
into *their* stories [. . .]

until this overwound transcendental yarn finally makes its way—from humble origins in an awkward municipal transaction—back to the *boulangerie*, back to the poem's beginning.

But before returning to the ending (and acknowledging the performative gesture to *defer* the impending punchlines, to try to arrive at them *differently*), a final note regarding humor's paradoxical irreconcilability feels relevant. Human cultures sans humor have never existed (so far as we know), which suggests there is an undeniable "essentialism" to humor in the human experience that the most dyed-in-the-wool poststructuralist would be at a loss to explain away. Yet, at the same time, humor—like love—*feels* like one of the most localized and innate of all human experiences. We can't always tell someone why what we find funny is funny, and we might not even understand it completely ourselves (so goes

the old adage “a joke explained is a joke killed”), yet we *know* it, deep down; reason can’t explain away this pre-cognitive, instinctive response. It feels like belief.

Moving these paradoxical irreconcilabilities closer to the heart is “Sex and Candy,” a poem that traces human desire from early childhood to just beyond the grave.¹⁰ Charting the evolution from candy as “the nookie of children” to sex becoming what adults “think about all the time,” two anecdotes muse on whether these corporeal desires belong to practices, “like Buddhism or Quakerism,” or belief systems, “like Roman Catholicism and football.” With humor coming from what Bakhtin would call “the lower bodily strata,”¹¹ the jokes, cannily shaded in prurient practices, tinge blue. But because blue jokes exploit the gap between “being” our bodies (in the material sense) and “having” our bodies (in the sense that our bodies can assume a critical distance in relation to themselves), they interrupt our day-to-day existence by returning the physical aspects of being human to the often unreflective metaphysical aspects. The first anecdote, about “this fellow I used to know / in college who had all these elaborate schemes for getting women” observes a libertine living a life of practice, cooking up “schemes” where women wearing wedding rings “means they do it” and smoking cigarettes is “a sure sign of moral flexibility”; the second, however, respects sex as “a slightly more complex field of study,” wherein “a nonagenarian German gentleman,” who, when asked

[. . .] what single thing he’d like to have now
from his student days,

[. . .]

smiled
and pointed toward his belt and leaned close and whispered,
“*Ein Steifer!*” and you don’t have to have a Ph. D. in German

10 From *The Temple Gate Called Beautiful*, published earlier in *Meridian*.

11 Mikhail Bakhtin. *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2009.

to know that's one of those words that must mean pretty much
what it sounds like! [. . .]

Yet when the narrator reflects on the old German man

. . . talking about sex,
I also think he was being not only funny but also nostalgic
for his dead wife, just as we are all sentimental about those
whom we love, yet when we look around, where are they?

the poem softens, grows increasingly contemplative, loosens
its certainty around how we do our desires and what they
actually mean to the human experience. For while we might
long to believe our loved ones will be up there “eating candy
in heaven” or “waiting for us / because they want to have sex
with us—heavenly sex!” the poem can't help butting against an
unquenchable *a priori* desire, at once both wiser and younger
than we are in any given moment. A desire is always kept in
Platonic distance from the Ideal, always simultaneously within
and beyond the body itself, a body always desiring to believe
in something, anything, if we could just pin down what that
thing is:

But when we get there, they won't want either one, and neither will we,

and instead, we'll all want the thing that's better than either sex
or candy, the thing that we got just a glimmer of once,
like a firefly in a distant meadow that we saw one night
as we were stuffing our faces or pulling somebody's pants down,
and it's got a name, that thing, we just don't know what it is.

Even as blue jokes remain maligned in certain segments of
polite society (i.e., at those poetry readings where eyes can
roll when the poet gets to the part about the German geezer
mourning his lost hard-on), the bodily humor in “Sex and
Candy” foists us into the unsettling gap between our *being*
a material body, replete with its limitations and finality, and
our *having* that body, forever uncertain and ambiguous. How
do we practice our body? What should our body believe? We
can seem like a stranger to ourselves in search of an identity

always in question, always in quest, always, as Simon Critchley (a Brit) muses, trapped “between our souls and *arseholes*.”¹²

Returning, finally, to the last stanza of “The Elephant of the Sea,” we find the poem coming home as well, back to Sylvia Plath and *s’il vous plait*, back to France. Humor’s force proves dizzying here, spinning notions of who’s allowed inside the joke, who’s left outside, and complicating what we think we understand about “home.” The French baker, who, now back in her own home, shares a story from the day with her husband:

“Funniest thing: today this stuttering spastic hillbilly
zombie hayseed-type¹³ dude calls me ‘Sylvia Plath,’
and her husband says, ‘You mean S’il Vous Plaît,
the author of *Ariel* (1965) and *The Colossus* (1967)?”

The first question humor theory asks is “Who is the joke on? Who’s the butt?” There’s a laugh here at the parochial rusticity of America compared to the intellectual superiority of France: the ex-pat American (of the sort Kirby refers to elsewhere as “*Hickus americanus*”¹⁴) bumbles up a personal embarrassment for the sharp-as-a-tack French family to skewer him with. As a poet and scholar, Kirby may revel in such a jest about a French cultural sophistication that America, writ large, will never attain, and, as the baker volleys her husband’s joke back at him in the poem’s final line (“and she’ll pop herself on the forehead with a floury hand / and say, ‘You know the *dates*?”), Kirby’s punchline feels so deftly kept up his sleeve, it’s easy to believe he sought to resolve this specific meaning all along, one where our hero, a rare breed of *Hickus americanus*, heads out into the world to bring us encouraging news from a

12 Simon Critchley. *On Humour*. London: Routledge, 2002.

13 Kirby calls back the line “stuttering spastic hillbilly zombie hayseed-type” verbatim in “The Exorcist of Notre-Dame” from *The House on Boulevard Street*, nesting a citational part of this poem’s punchline.

14 From “The Fugawi,” published in *The Ha-Ha* and earlier in *The Southern Review*.

superior frontier, a place where people keep their voices down in restaurants and don't wear Packers jerseys to church.

"Jokes," Critchley argues, "are like small anthropological essays." In his reckoning, humor is what reminds us of where we come from and sometimes what "puts one *back in place*." But such a unilateral return is not how humor works; there's more than one way to get put back in place. Another laugh here could unite the two married couples: the narrator and his wife ultimately end up sharing their literary pun with another married couple, moving the joke from the broad scope of international stereotypes to the intimate confines of matrimony, evaporating any cross-cultural tensions in a closer-to-the-bone expression of traditional human connection. From another angle, like it or not, Kirby simultaneously belongs to a society that recoils at a perceived namby-pamby elitism in French life (recall when, in response to France's reluctance to join the War on Terror, cafeterias in the U.S. Capitol rebranded "French Fries" as "Freedom Fries"). While humor wields great power to return us home, it doesn't necessarily do so triumphantly; sometimes, to quote a final time from Critchley, it's "the very relativity of humour [that] can function as an (un)timely reminder of who one is [. . .] [and] can provide information about oneself that one would rather *not* have." Were an anti-Francophile American of this mold to get a hold of this poem (it could happen), they might find community precisely where others found derision—with the DMV clerk and the spastic hillbilly zombie hayseed-type—laughing ironically in deplorable resistance to a perceived pretentious attitude coming from all things elite, frightening things like poetry—and humor—things too foreign, too complicated, too ambivalent to be reduced to one stable, easily digestible answer.

Humor has certainly not gone unnoticed in Kirby's work—it's been roundly praised for its "casual, decompressed" voice,¹⁵

15 Kevin Clark. "Everyman's Monologist." Review of *The House on Boulevard Street: New and Selected Poems*, by David Kirby. *The Southern Review*, Winter 2008, vol. 44, no. 1, pp. 195–98.

at once “talky, whimsical, [and] jokey,”¹⁶ with an “easygoing wit and immediacy.”¹⁷ Kirby’s off-the-cuff jokes, amiably delivered by the kind of guy you wouldn’t mind grabbing a steak with, feel so unassuming, so easily enjoyed that—especially in an art form that tends toward the pensive—the breadth of their artistry can become obscured. On full display here, and working its paradoxical magic, is what Castiglione termed *sprezzatura*,¹⁸ a rhetorical effect whereby the perceived *laissez-faire* quality of something is in direct proportion to the rigor of its composition. If for no other reason than to honor such masterfully crafted effortlessness, we owe Kirby’s humor more careful consideration. Humor works epistemically in these poems, at times ontologically, documenting the tension between our intellectual understanding of meaning’s limitations and our instinctual desire for its comforting reach to go further than we know it can. Its import far exceeds whatever stylistic comportment it adds to his “trademark” easygoing, everyman ethos (“perfect for those who say they don’t like poetry,” as an anonymous admirer puts it). It is a profound laugh we get from Kirby’s poetry, a laughter at once in concert with our brethren-in-human-frivolity and, at the same time, a laughter in solitude, in places we can only recognize within ourselves.

16 Carol Muske-Dukes. “Good Golly.” *The New York Times*, 29 Apr. 2007, www.nytimes.com/2007/04/29/books/review/Muske-Dukes.t.html.

17 Peter Klappert. “The Invention of a Kirby Poem.” *The Southern Review*, Winter 2000, vol. 36, no. 1, pp. 196–207.

18 *Book of the Courtier*. London: Penguin, 2003.