Birmingham Poetry Review

Volume 41 *BPR - Spring 2014* Article 10

2014

A Jester's Truth: Faith, Humor, and Vision in the Poetry of Andrew Hudgins

Ned Balbo

Ned Balbo

A Jester's Truth: Faith, Humor, and Vision in the Poetry of Andrew Hudgins

This year, Andrew Hudgins published two books: *The Joker: A Memoir,* released by Simon & Schuster with all the fanfare a major publisher can offer, and *A Clown at Midnight,* Hudgins' ninth book of poetry, on Mariner, a Houghton Mifflin imprint. Their titles signal Hudgins' intent: to explore the operations of that delicate verbal mechanism—the joke—as well as its deeper sources in the human psyche. The decision is a gutsy one. Hudgins is a Baby Boomer, the Baptist son of an Air Force captain and a housewife from Georgia; a so-called "military brat," he grew up mostly in the South, and found that joking was one way of fitting in. He is also a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award, an incisive critic and essayist, and a distinguished poet whose work has appeared in *The Paris Review*, *Poetry*, and *The New Yorker*. Still, Hudgins remains an iconoclast: he must tell the truth as he sees it, consequences be damned, turning his lens on brutal truth as well as beauty. He himself is aware of this. Of the title poem of *American Rendering*, his 2010 New and Selected volume, Hudgins says the following—"I look at one massacre spiraling out to the next massacre and then the next along the nineteenth century Southwest frontier"—and a subsequent remark sheds light on all his work: "[W]e have a responsibility not only to ameliorate [violence] as much as possible but to understand it and grieve it" (*The Writer's Chronicle*, May/Summer 2013; interview conducted by Andrew McFadyen-Ketchum). Hudgins may call himself a joker, but his character as a poet is shaped by conscience and compassion; the light is brighter because he dares to look at darkness.

It may be that such a writer needs humor to survive—to drive away the shadows that threaten our fallen world. In an interview with Nick Norwood included in Hudgins' prose collection *The Glass Anvil*, the poet observes that it's "fun to play" with language, "fun to feel words resist chaos, insist on their arbitrary and hallowed connection to the world and to meaning." Hudgins' insight is revealing: it is the author's will that "insists" on meaning, despite nihilism's threat: the fear that nothing matters, the fear of "chaos." Both humor, and poetry, defend us from this fear, one that Randall Jarrell, in his essay "The Other Frost," articulates as follows: there is "evil in the world…It's so; and there's nothing you can do about it; and if there were, would *you* ever do it?" Jarrell was writing of Frost's dark masterpieces, poems like "Directive" or "Home Burial," but the question applies just as well to Hudgins:

What would *he* ever do—in response to "evil," or whatever we call the darkness in human experience? Hudgins' answer is clear: write poetry and tell jokes, to reassert perspective, to find meaning in despair—and that's what he does in these new books, one in prose, the other in verse. Recounting jokes that soar or fail, he explores laughter's sudden grace, enacting the vital joys that jokes and poetry offer.

Jokes have always had a place in Hudgins' poetry, and he is a writer who understands their common ground. Neither a joke nor a poem can succeed unless each part serves the whole; the mechanism of words must be well made, perfectly paced. Surprise is crucial; however planned, the effects must seem spontaneous. "Mary Magdalene's Left Foot," from *Saints and Strangers*, Hudgins' debut, shows the influence of joke structure. Hudgins recalls the claims of a news article that this relic of Christ's companion has turned up, an artifact that readers find "encased in antique gold / and pedestrian prose, apart / from the rest of her imaginably lush lost body." The zeugma here calls the relic's integrity into question; the rest of the sentence reverses our expectation of cliché—an *un*imaginably lush lost body—to suggest that the speaker has probably spent some time imagining what her body was like. (Hudgins is one of our few poets who admit

to masturbation: see *The Never-Ending's* "Heat Lightning in a Time of Drought" or "His Imaginary Friend" in *Shut Up, You're Fine*, Hudgins' collection of dark light verse.) The poem ends with a twist both revelatory and funny: when Magdalene kissed "each suppurating wound that swelled [Christ's] flesh," she knew

> that it was God's clear flesh beneath
> its human dying. And that is more than you or I
> will ever know of where we place our lips.

In *The Joker*, Hudgins writes, "Laughter isn't demonic, but the result of our human double vision. We see both the perfect world we desire and the flawed one we live in. Believers and unbelievers live in different flawed worlds and conceive different perfections." Hudgins, however, lives in both—just as Frost did, as Mark Van Doren observed long ago in *The Atlantic Monthly*: "Like any other distinguished person, Frost lives in two worlds at once: this one, and another one which only makes it [i.e., the earth] more attractive" ("Robert Frost's America"). Hudgins, too, loves the world in which we live—its elements, its grime, its physicality—and this love finds expression in his humor. In "Mary Magdalene's Left Foot," the poet's closure melds the poignancy of Magdalene's ministrations with the urgency of a mother warning her son about STDs. Both readings are fully convincing and fully simultaneous, just as we'd expect from a master poet and joke-teller. As the memoir puts it, jokes "illuminate how we think and the often irresolvable contradictions our lives are built on. The laughter they draw from us both expresses our sorrow at our inconsistency and soothes it." Here, too, is sorrow evident: the anguish of the rational believer who seeks to glimpse the divine in flesh.

Some of Hudgins' poems refer explicitly to jokes, drawing from them parables of human behavior. An obvious example is "Heat Lightning in a Time of Drought," originally published in *The Never-Ending,* which offers one of the "Little Moron" jokes the memoir mentions: divorced from his first

wife, the speaker recalls a joke about the cuckolded dimwit who catches his mate in flagrante delicto, then holds a gun to his own head, threatening, "*Don't laugh— / you're next*." The speaker muses, "It is the wisest joke I know because / the heart's a violent muscle, opening / and closing." As a poet, Hudgins' heart is mostly open; the joke serves as a failed attempt to distance the speaker from painful experience—a failure that the poet planned. The tactic shows ambivalence at art's attempt to master pain: pain resides in memory, and memory is precious—indeed, it makes us who we are. In "Heat Lightning," the Little Moron joke breaks the tension before we encounter painful truths: "Each happy memory leads me to a sad one." Life's "irresolvable contradictions" are part of memory's fabric. Both the poem's speaker and the joke's protagonist share a self-destructive impulse, though art offers the consolation that not everything is meaningless; the joke consoles us with the laughter it provokes. Jokes are "toys made out of words," Hudgins observes in his memoir; only the human knack for letting words deceive us—the "unrealities of language"—allows the Little Moron's threat to seem, fleetingly, possible—and, therefore, funny when we realize it's not.

Less funny and far more awkward are the racist jokes that Hudgins catalogues: they are evidence of divisions that the poet unflinchingly confronts, relics of an earlier era that hasn't yet released its hold. At times, Hudgins laments the very jokes that make him laugh, aware that laughter may be misread as endorsement of a racist view. (Chris Rock and Louis C.K. have it easy: our culture expects comedians to tell the truth through humor while skewering all parties and political correctness. Poets? Not so much.) In *The Joker*, Hudgins reminds us that racism is often generational, tracing the slow walk toward enlightenment through his grandmother's example. She is the starting point, the "angriest person [Hudgins has] ever known who wasn't actually unhinged," and her rage boils with racism. That Hudgins can also say, "I loved her," is testament to the bonds of family, the connections that take root long before we are old enough to think.

As far back as *The Glass Hammer*, Hudgins' fourth book, we meet this larger-than-life, snuff-chewing, epithet-spewing figure, a woman who'd lick "her rough right thumb and order me, *Come here*" before wiping off some smudge or fleck of dirt, her spit smelling of "lipstick and tobacco" ("Grandmother's Spit"). In "At Work," she expounds sarcastically on what to call African Americans—"Oh, negroes, nigras, colored, black—my God!"—before approving the most offensive word. In his memoir, Hudgins says, "My Grandmomma's racism was the pigheaded racism of the old school—staunch, unrepentant, and all the more ferocious as it saw history turning against it." In both new and older poems, Hudgins explores this historical turn, appalled by the hate he encounters, yet empathizing (up to a point) with those whose words he finds repellent: despite their hate, the result of history and culture, they are also human beings: angry, misguided, flawed, destructive.

A prime example is "Magic Button," also from *The Glass Hammer*, which describes an uncle's repugnant fantasy of erasing all African Americans from existence. He tries to turn the speaker into an ally, hoping he'll drop his guard and admit that, yes, deep down, he'd like to push the "magic button," too. The uncle tries to soothe the speaker's scruples—"'Nope. They wouldn't die. They'd disappear'"—then goes on to repeat the question: "…I'm only asking whether you'd press the button/if nobody'd know, nobody'd see. I would…" In poems like "Magic Button" or "At Work," Hudgins reports those taboo conversations designed to be heard by one race only, exposing their ugliness and hate, but social class is his subject, too: both grandmother and uncle are on the wrong side of history, their racism closely tied to their upbringing and the past.

Of course, Hudgins is acutely aware of the price paid by so many on the right side of history: with still-simmering outrage, "The Names of the Lost," a rare Hudgins villanelle in *American Rendering*, elegizes the 1964 murder of three civil rights workers by the Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi: "The murderers, old men now, still walk the town. / The nights burned all night long that Freedom Summer. / Ask Andrew

Goodman, James Chaney, Michael Schwerner." Racist jokes are different from the verbal toys that enchanted Hudgins in childhood, as Hudgins points out in *The Joker*: "Racial humor, like most humor, tries to draw you into its world, but it has two worlds. One is the world of the absurd, the illogical, the disjunctive, the incongruous—the world of jokes. But the other is the world of racial superiority, and superiority, according to Aristotle, is the realm in which jokes thrive, the smart mocking the stupid, the strong the weak, the attractive the ugly, the white the black." Because no reasonable person today can accept a power structure based on race, not even within a joke's transient confines, Hudgins writes, "I think we are seeing the death throes and we are hearing the epitaph being written" for racist jokes. In his poems on race, however, Hudgins chooses the harder road: he shows racists as real people—damaged, angry, or misguided—daring us to turn the scrutiny on ourselves.

Robert Frost, too, sometime employed ethnic or racial stereotypes—I think of the wince-inducing "A Case for Jefferson" (with its references to "Marxian Muscovite" and "Russian Jew") or "The Discovery of the Madeiras," with its tale-within-a-tale of enslaved lovers who fall ill and are tossed overboard before contagion can spread: but this couple are murder ballad stock figures, not characters. When his light verse combined ethnic stereotypes with sexual content, Frost suppressed it; such poems didn't accord with his carefully tended image of the wise, drolly witty Farmer-Poet. Hudgins, by contrast, has trouble suppressing anything: as he admits in *The Joker*, "[W]hen people think I'm a vulgarian, I'll do my damnedest to prove them right. Freud would call this impulse a minor manifestation of the death wish. Edgar Allan Poe more resonantly termed it 'the imp of the perverse.'"

This very imp is on display in Frost's "Pride of Ancestry," a poem Frost never included in his books. According to Edward Connery Lathem and Lawrence Thompson in their 1972 selection, *Robert Frost: Poetry and Prose*, the poet was disappointed that editor Louis Untermeyer found Frost's off-color poems "'not only blasphemous and bawdy but unprintable.'"

Its polished language aside, "Pride of Ancestry" is as politically incorrect as one of Louis C.K.'s monologues. The first stanza sets the tone:

> The Deacon's wife was a bit desirish
> And liked her sex relations wild,
> So she lay with one of the shanty Irish
> And he begat the Deacon's child.

Along with these anti-Irish stereotypes, humanity's foibles have their moment: fear of women's sexuality, the pleasures of deception, humiliation of the cuckold, the absurdity of sex. Anti-Catholic sentiment? Check. Self-deception and narcissism? Check: for "pride of ancestry," we discover, is a family's pride in its own adulterous ancestor—the Deacon's wife—who brought an Irishman's genes into their bloodline:

> Her portrait hangs in the family gallery
> And a family of nobodies likes to think
> That their descent from such a calorie
> Accounts for their genius and love of drink.

At least they have an excuse!—or, more precisely, a myth of family origin. Clearly, the world of "Pride of Ancestry" and that of Hudgins' sense of humor overlap. At the same time, left out of *American Rendering* but still a point of pride with their author (and many readers) are the poems of Andrew Hudgins' *Shut Up, You're Fine: Instructive Poetry for Very, Very Bad Children* (2009). Included are "The Schlitz Malt Liquor Bull," "Dead Things I Have Seen," "We Buried the Cat But the Dog Dug Her Up" and, inevitably, "The Thumping of the Bed." The collection offers surprise, misdirection, the breaking of taboos—in short, the imp that we find in Frost's "Pride of Ancestry." Presented as a book for children, *Shut Up, You're Fine* offers sex, death, and the hypocrisies that surround us; the "bad children" of its subtitle are Hudgins' grown-up readers. Hudgins knows that jokes "are often—some would say always—intricately bound up with power."

He's right: Frost's "shanty" Irishman is funny, in part, because he upends the power dynamic: a presumably pompous Deacon fails to satisfy his wife, distracted, perhaps, by the next world's promise. Or the wife, expected to serve, asserts her will at his expense. Readers join in on the joke, laughing at a "family of nobodies," till they reflect on some of the branches in their own family tree. Frost pokes fun at pretension, reminding us that even high birth originates in sex, and that hypocrites turn even scandal into a source of pride.

In general, Frost and Hudgins favor darker insights; they forestall despair through humor, tolerance, and faith. That doesn't mean any of these come easily. Indeed, Hudgins' struggle with faith underlies some of *The Joker's* most perceptive passages, and some of Hudgins' most powerful poems. "Mary Magdalene's Left Foot" deftly captures that struggle, but so do many others in Hudgins' canon: "Praying Drunk," "Communion in the Asylum," "Rain," "The God of Frenzies," "The Beatitudes"—there are too many to list here. "The Hereafter" (from 1988's *After the Lost War,* Hudgins' book of dramatic monologues on Confederate soldier and Georgia poet Sidney Lanier) catalogues the afterlife in several versions, invoking skepticism and faith in equal measure: "Some people as they die grow fierce, afraid. / They see a bright light, offer frantic prayers, / and try to climb them, like Jacob's ladder, up/to heaven…." Others, self-righteously pious, imagine a heaven absurdly specific: "They'll talk / of how they'll finally learn to play the flute / and speak good French." The poet's imp resists restraint before Lanier, or Hudgins, offers,

> For so long I have thought of us as nails
> God drives into the oak floor of this world,
> it's hard to comprehend the hammer turned
> to claw me out. I'm joking, mostly. I love
> the possibilities—not one or two
> but all of them…

The joke is absorbed by Hudgins' existential question: are we just nails pummeled by God, wrenched out and discarded,

bent and broken? Is God our loving father or the hammer that pounds us senseless? The poet's joke is deadly serious, yet he turns from darkness to a more generous view, accepting multiple visions of heaven even as he seeks his own. In *The Joker*, Hudgins explores the appeal of religious jokes, showing how they expose the limitations of dogma.

> Christianity, like all religions, offers meaning. Jokes home in on the disordered places where meaning fails. They are drawn to chaos but they are terrified of it too because they cannot NOT see where meaning breaks down. Once they find those inconsistencies and breakdowns, they play with them…. Their attraction to chaos can be satanic delight or a godly attempt to heal by cauterizing a wound…. They are suspicious of systems of thought and enamored of the anomalies in them, but mostly they are content to mock, not destroy, those spindly systems.

Another way to look at Hudgins' viewpoint is that such jokes simultaneously submit religious belief to reason and unreason: faith's supernatural and least credible tenets ("credible" as measured by everyday experience) are made to collide with all-too-human failings and/or language's "unrealities"; the result is a "cauterizing" nonsense. One of Hudgins' best jokes in this vein (and it should be mentioned that he is a joke collector, not a joke inventor: he reports what he has heard) involves Christ who, in the midst of his crucifixion, summons Peter to the cross; the Apostle must endure the Roman soldiers' beatings three times before he reaches Him. We've all known merciless authority, so the Apostle seems quite comic. He doesn't say, "I can't come, it's too dangerous," but simply endures the beatings—because of faith, and because whatever Christ must have to say is worth it. Unfortunately, the joke's punchline—I won't give it away here—isn't the call that Peter, or we, expect. The Apostle's faith, rather than regenerative, is as blind and pointless as our own might seem in our darkest moments—yet we react with laughter, not

despair. Hudgins' religious poems and religious jokes involve, at times, the "thrill of blasphemy" he admits to in *The Joker*, but they also reject unreasoning faith in the search for something better: a way to believe despite faith's lapses of fact or logic.

A Clown at Midnight, Hudgins' new book of poetry, offers a renewed approach and new textures that enrich long-held concerns. "Suddenly Adult" confronts Hudgins' lifelong struggle with faith through rhyme and alliteration that is almost obsessive—unusual for a poet whose command of plain speech is a hallmark.

> When I was young, God,
> young, too, angered
> easily and he glared
> as I malingered
> in innocence, and swaggered
> its dancehalls….

Here, Hudgins' slant rhymes cascade down the page almost as if the end-words are changing into new words: "God" will rhyme with "tangoed" and "glued" but also "good" and "goad"; "gored" with "butterfingered," "safeguard," and "laggard." The effect is mesmerizing and powerful—as if language itself is escaping the author's grasp yet carrying truths that it understands and reveals in its strange music. We invent God as we find language in a world only as old as we are; but "Father Hopkins" and "[George] Herbert," poet-priests, remind us the Word is sacred and that its fluid transformations are proof of its magic: the power of prayer. (Angry at God or not, the speaker talks to Him and about Him.) In the McFadyen-Ketchum interview, Hudgins explains, "For decades, I avoided rhyme, almost viscerally repulsed by it….To my young ear, the janglyness of it clashed with the serious business of the poem, making the stories seem trivial and mocking and distorting the serious efforts of the poem to think." The poems of *Shut Up, You're Fine* turned Hudgins back to rhyme since, "[f]or the humor to work, light verse needs to strike the gong

right in the middle, not on the edges," and he began to "apply it to serious poems," mixing slant and exact rhymes to achieve new effects. *Ecstatic in the Poison* (2003) signals this trend through its extensive use of Emily Dickinson's hymn meter and rhyme scheme in poems such as "In," "Behemoth and Leviathan," or "The Chinaberry Trees."

One consequence of this release from plainness has been to widen Hudgins' vision to include poems of surreal strangeness—a fascinating development for a poet whose past work has been so vividly realistic, so rooted in the body and the world. *American Rendering*'s "Mother" is an example in the sense that surrealism fuses with language-play: dream-like transitions place the speaker at an "appealingly dilapidated pond" where fish, flowers, and birds keep changing— "dissolving / and resolving in aureate metamorphoses, golden fish to golden flower, / flower to fish"; the final underwater figure is "Mother, never surfacing" who "lap[s] the pool like an Olympian." *A Clown at Midnight* sends us underwater, too—this time with the Magi, caught on "[d]eep-sea cameras":

> …The magi, cradling
> enameled caskets,
> rock woodenly over horses
> mincing up the vertiginous
> tilt of an obsidian trench.
> They do not speak. They merely
> flow with the glacial undulations
> of gilt-harnessed geldings and
> the mercurial surge
> of underwater current…

Effects in "The Return of the Magi" include internal or end-rhyme ("undulations," "stones"), assonance ("stones," "robes"), lots of alliteration ("green," "grainy," "glacial," "gilt," "geldings"), all of which lend the poem an aural density we'd expect of Wallace Stevens—unusual for Hudgins. The poem's surrealism resonates: the Magi rise up through the depths of—what? A real ocean? Our collective unconscious or shared

history? Eons old, they do not rush; ancient as statues or memory itself, "From long immersion, they've turned / to verdigris… / their hands and faces verdigris as they ascend / from black to black-green water." The vision doesn't require a gloss to strike the chords of similar ghost visions that lurk between sleep and waking, between meaninglessness and revelation. Hudgins' rich language and sharp eye capture "the same apocalyptic / languor with which they left," evoking Eliot's "Journey of the Magi" just enough to add a further unsettling element to this return.

Still, Hudgins has always been a poet of deep intelligence; his explorations of dreams or the semi-rational are striking but not defining. More characteristic are those poems that, whatever their overall mode, convey some narrative. Two excellent recent poems—one in *American Rendering*, the other in *A Clown at Midnight*—touch on childlessness: specifically, the absence of a daughter. In *The Joker*, Hudgins reminds us that he grew up in a household shadowed by death—one reason that the escape of jokes held such attraction. His parents, "secretly grieving," had lost a daughter before he was born. In his grandmother's account, Hudgins writes, "[m]y parents could not talk about [my sister]…. Her death in a car accident, my mother at the wheel, was a wound too raw for words to touch." This silence, meant as protection but which served instead to teach "sorrow and fear," has its counterpart in the dark places (interior and exterior) that inhabit Hudgins' poems but perhaps also in Hudgins' poems for a nonexistent daughter.

"My Daughter," the first of *American Rendering*'s new poems, is no homage to Weldon Kees. Whether the speaker is a dream-version of Hudgins or a homeless man "[s]creened from sleet by carpet remnants," he is haunted by the family he dreams into existence one night and outlives except for "a daughter—a teacher—and her two children, / one damaged." The poem is a heartbreaking hall of mirrors: he wakes the next day only to revisit this daughter nightly, claiming that he now has the means to buy "Teresa" "the help she needs"; but the dream-daughter fades, her flawed child in the speaker's

arms, as the waking world intrudes and the lullaby fails: "I serenade her. 'O unhushable baby, hush.'" More powerful in its concision and directness is *A Clown at Midnight*'s "Foresworn" whose speaker refuses to rationalize childlessness; instead, he accepts what, in retrospect, he recognizes as a choice: "Not twenty now or twelve, / no girl-child remembers pink / plush monsters awaiting her / as she harnessed sensibility." More poignant examples follow, the daughter half-appearing through what she never did or felt, till the poem resolves in stoic acceptance:

> …With two wives,
> I have foresworn thee, daughter,
> and your thrilling materiality
> in the flesh's rage. In me
> no father pines for your
> embodiment, and my true daughter's
> too composed to cry out
> for incarnation and its cares.

The daughter who never was must have a father who never was: the speaker whose words bring her, fleetingly, to life. To foreswear fatherhood invokes possibilities never to be resolved. To speak of incarnation's "cares" is to admit its joys as well: these, too, the speaker has foresworn. Though simpler and much shorter, "Foresworn" is kin to Frost's "Home Burial," inspired in part by the loss of his firstborn son, as well as that of his nephew. As the dialogue reaches its pitch, Amy, the wife, declares,

> '…The nearest friends can go
> With anyone to death, comes so far short
> They might as well not try to go at all….
> Friends make pretense of following to the grave,
> But before one is in it, their minds are turned
> And making the best of their way back to life
> And living people, and things they understand.
> But the world's evil…'

The epitaph on Robert Frost's tombstone, the last line of his poem "The Lesson for Today"—"I had a lover's quarrel with the world"—fits Hudgins here and now: at times, the world seems evil, as Frost's Amy declares, but it's the only world we have. "Foresworn" interrogates that world at an existential level, meditating on the self and our immediate creators—parents who are or might have been—while reflecting on how we change with what we bring—or fail to bring—into existence.

The new book's title quotes Lon Chaney, Sr.—silent film actor and "the Man of a Thousand Faces"— and the title poem's full epigraph—"The essence of true horror is a clown at midnight"— reflects the range of Hudgins' performance: the slide from gaiety to despair, and every point between. As a poet, Hudgins has never been a clown—he's too smart for that—though he lets humor enter poems that feature human frailties, those that address the deepest darkness, and those where bitterness gives way to compassion in search of grace. And he identifies with the archetype, at least when it serves his purpose: as the poet observes of his own joking, "…I want something from you—laughter—and to make you laugh I have to juggle subjects that make you laugh."

It's not surprising, therefore, that Hudgins picks up a thread he introduced in *Ecstatic in the Poison*'s "A Joke Walks into a Bar" and extends it in several new poems, exploring humor as explicit subject and, in some cases, personifying the joke. "The Humor Institute" presents a think tank's sense of mission, seeking to organize and decide for all what's funny and what's not: "We'll help plan suitable retirement dinners— / no morbid jokes and no unseemly glee." But without the anarchic impulse, is humor even possible? Hudgins, clearly, doesn't think so, as the Institute sets down rules: "No drunken dancing through the woods at night. / Such revelries pose long-term complications // with group morale and, thus, the bottom line." By contrast, *A Clown at Midnight*'s opening poem, "A Joke Is Washed Up on a Desert Island," offers *all* jokes rolled into a single character: every imp or impulse bent on shattering pretension. The joke is conscious, charged with

life, a deliberately stilted allegory, yet the joke's key questions echo the memoir:

> …What angry hope / or compulsive mania
>
> flung him on the judgment of friends
> and strangers: a laugh or silence?
> He'd never paused to mull things over,
> and though thinking's a nuisance,
>
> it's time to think….

The poem proceeds through a sea of puns hilarious, contrived, offensive—exactly like many favorite jokes: Bob, the "armless, legless man/bobbing in the spray," Natalie Wood "washing…ashore," the naked island beauties of a thousand dirty jokes. Yet the joke's realization is both Hudgins' and our own:

> And all at once he gets it:
>
> the human cost of laughter. It pains him.
> The people he's offended,
> they're human, unlike him, a concept
> he'd never comprehended—

This epiphany—that laughter may exert a human cost—mirrors Hudgins' remarks in prose: "Jokes delight us by making us nervous and then relieving the nervous tension…. Jokers make us anxious because they want something from us." But sometimes jokes go wrong, and every joker knows that "the moment between the last words of the joke and the laugh, if there is a laugh, is a fraught and complicated expanse of time." Recalling his fondness for tasteless jokes, Hudgins remarks, "I was at the age when I was beginning to see in myself the power to harm awfully and the power to be harmed awfully." This double-edged power, shared by jokes and art,

is one that Hudgins explores fruitfully when he combines both in his poems.

To write a memoir in the context of a love for jokes—many potentially offensive—is a risk that few poets would undertake. To release, simultaneously, a compelling book of poetry focused on humor but not itself light verse is rarer still. Hudgins' imp of the perverse is working overtime, the poet's audacity undimmed—and this is all to the good. Contemporary poetry isn't noted for its sense of humor, as David Yezzi points out in a recent *New Criterion*. According to Yezzi, "poetry has become so docile, so domesticated, it's like a spayed housecat lolling in a warm patch of sun. Most poets choose to play it safe, combining a few approved modes in a variety of unexceptional ways." Later, he observes, "What poetry today sorely wants, then, is more bile: the realism, humor, and intensity occasioned by the satiric impulse. It's what Shakespeare might have thought of as 'the bitter fool.'" Yezzi is right, though Hudgins isn't bitter: in discussing jesters in *The Joker*, he observes,

> In medieval and Renaissance courts, jesters softened with humor truths forbidden to those without official license to amuse the monarch. But a successful jester needed tact and a discerning alertness to the king's mood.

Far more than a jester, Hudgins entertains his "monarchs"—i.e., his readers—through poems both serious and funny, invoking his wit or a joke's structure in service of some purpose. His "tact" and "discerning alertness" are second to none, though as Hudgins admits, boundaries attract him, and giving offense remains a risk for anyone willing to speak the truth. Hudgins' poems are among the dark glories of contemporary poetry, rooted in real-life experience, compassion for those discarded, a productive tension between faith and reason, acute intelligence, and skepticism of

pretension; they are beautifully written, technically masterful, wide-ranging in tone and subject.

Long ago, in *The Atlantic*, Mark Van Doren summed up Frost's vision in words that resonate for readers of Andrew Hudgins:

> [Frost's] vision is the comic vision that doubts even itself.…The comic genius ignores nothing that seems true, however inconvenient it may be for something else that seems as true.…The choice of Frost is clear. His humor, an indispensable thing in any great poet, is in his case the sign that he has decided to see everything that he can see…One couldn't say half as much if one were tragic.

More recently, in "Robinson, Frost, and Jeffers, and the New Narrative Poetry," Mark Jarman describes the matter and means that Frost and Hudgins share: use of the blank verse line, "simple language" that "fall[s] out along the blank verse arrangement as Frost would have had it," the way a "subject's life has taken shape in the speaker's own"—"a provisional quality," Jarman calls it. Most important, Jarman sees in Hudgins "the Frost who trusted the narrative and the mystery of the story to which he might not be able to draw a conclusion." In resorting to humor, Hudgins goes further than Frost dared in an era that discourages the satiric impulse in poetry; he looks more deeply and directly at America's racial divide and is committed to exploring, in contemporary form, the same evils, and transient grace, that Frost encountered in human nature. A regional poet of the South, as Frost was of New England, Hudgins is widely conversant in a Biblical and literary tradition not limited to region; instead, like Frost, he is a world-class poet whose work speaks to every reader even as it conjures a particular time or place. The very benefits of the time we live in—a pluralistic poetic landscape, less centralized critical authority, a diversity of poets of wide-ranging schools and styles—may obscure Hudgins' achievements, but

his work will last. Allowing for the difference in time and place, his body of work already equals and may surpass that of Frost; I can think of no other poet who takes such risks in ways that matter—in tone, thought, and subject—while submitting himself to such rigor of conscience, observation, and style. Indeed, Randall Jarrell's remarks on Frost in "To the Laodiceans" apply equally well to hudgins:

"Frost's best poetry—and there is a great deal of it, at once wonderfully different and wonderfully alike—deserves the attention, submission, and astonished awe that real art always requires of us."

In "Swordfish," one of *A Clown at Midnight*'s vivid vignettes, a neighbor tells the speaker's girlfriend "she was a pretty lady,/a real pretty lady. She looked like a dream./One day she'd make a real man really happy." The speaker responds with "three hard flat laughs." But don't be fooled. The neighbor wants to sleep with the girlfriend, using the joke to disguise his intent while humiliating the speaker: the friend's blush confirms his guilt, and the girlfriend opens her eyes, "her azure eyelids shimmering with jade." In the joke, we see so much: the operations of the human heart, desire, and betrayal, and a poet who plays the fool in service of the truth he tells, his language simple yet controlled, and deeply moving.

Sources include:

Jarrell, Randall. "The Other Frost"; "To the Laodiceans." *Poetry and the Age*, The Ecco Press (New York), 1980.

Jarman, Mark. "Robinson, Frost, and Jeffers, and the New Narrative Poetry." *The Secret of Poetry,* Story Line Press (Ashland, OR), 2001.

McFadyen-Ketchum, Andrew. "Halfway to Symbol." Interview of Andrew Hudgins. *The Writer's Chronicle*, May/Summer 2013.

Norwood, Nick. "Interview with Nick Norwood." Interview of Andrew Hudgins. *The Glass Anvil*, University of Michigan Press (Ann Arbor, MI), 1997.

Van Doren, Mark. "Robert Frost's America." *The Atlantic Monthly*, June 1951.

Yezzi, David. "The Bitter Fool." *The New Criterion*, April 2013.

Books by Andrew Hudgins

Poetry

Saints and Strangers, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1985.

After the Lost War: A Narrative, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1988.

The Never-Ending: New Poems, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1991.

The Glass Hammer: A Southern Childhood, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1994.

Babylon in a Jar, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1998.

Ecstatic in the Poison: New Poems, Overlook Press (Woodstock, NY), 2003.

Shut Up You're Fine: Poems for Very, Very Bad Children, Overlook Press (Woodstock, NY), 2009.

American Rendering: New and Selected Poems, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 2010.

A Clown at Midnight, Houghton Mifflin (Boston MA), 2013.

Prose

The Glass Anvil (essays), University of Michigan Press (Ann Arbor, MI), 1997.

Diary of a Poem (essays), University of Michigan Press (Ann Arbor, MI), 2011.

The Joker (memoir), Simon & Schuster (New York), 2013.