visual stimuli, find pleasure in the voicing of words, sounds, and not frustrate ourselves with the fact that we don't understand but rather sit blissed out in the movement of the text. We can pull it apart, play inside.

WT: I contend that the dictionary is in our minds and we only go to the one on the shelf to confirm what we already know. Sometimes it corrects us. But I want to know how the author knows certain items. I don't mean a glossary which would do my homework for me (though I wouldn't mind that too), but a glossary which is personal to the author's mind, some sense of how key words dwell there. I'm convinced that the ultimate name for the game in poetry is intelligence: what we know and *how* we know it.

AK: I find it obtrusive and limiting to be held to another's imagination. I'm more interested in how he/she processes language. And how, through language, history is created: as we travel through another's text, how we're affected by that and how the *text* reads *us*. For as decontextualized tropes, it pulls our past *from* us, appropriating it. In festive disease, we interact, recreate, partake in a ceremony of substantiated movement. Continuous play. Game implies end, resolve. In a game you strive to win, to get to the end, to battle it out for the winning score, the prize. There should never be winning, only playing, always. Casting words, seeing where they land. Bliss in the abyss, in the eroticism of the gap. When you talk about intelligence and information retrieval, you enter into a consciousness which leaves the body behind. We no longer live it. It's the leaving of bissett's "What We Have" for Olson's "We must have what what we want: finding ourselves seething in a centripital force of desire and seduction."

WT: Pound felt that the word conveyed intellect, which is the fruit of intelligence. He saw visual energy via image, audial energy via sound, and intellectual energy via word. United, they create "language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree," for him the ideal poem, full energy.

AK: How can you talk of *Ideals*. What exactly is, "the utmost possible degree?" How can language stop? How can energy stop?

WT: He sees the words as conveying the "dance of the intellect," meaning words in their dictionary sense. Olson demurred, said no, the syllable is what rushes intellect along, a syllabic dance within the word dance—from which I demure. I believe primary stress,

that is, the firmest form of emphasis, determines meaning, where you throw it as you read. My favorite example is the opening of John Donne's "The Canonization": "For God's sake, hold your tongue and let me love." First flat it out completely into a kind of mono stress: "Forgodssakeholdyourtongueandletmelove." Flat, flat, flat, monotonous, dead soul you see. For *God's* sake, hold your tongue and let me love. For God's *sake*, hold your tongue and let me love. For God's sake, *hold* your tongue and let me love. For God's sake, hold your *tongue* and let me love. For God's sake, hold your tongue and let *me* love. For God's sake, hold your tongue and let me *love*.

Coleridge in his note on *Christabel* and Hopkins in his "An old English rhythm revived" both remark that if you keep track of primary stress as you write or read, the lesser stresses (secondary, tertiary, weak) will take care of themselves. Likewise with the four degrees of juncture. If you keep your ear out for places where a decided pause is needed, the lesser pauses will take care of themselves. Duncan, a master in these matters, sometimes paused for 30 heartbeats, finger at wrist, the most decided junctures of all. So a primary stress, primary juncture interplay goes on.

AK: So in the primary stressing of Donne's line, with each shift of stress, there is shift of meaning.

WT: Yes, yes, yes! Equal attention is needed to consonant stress (the vowels compacted) which leads to musical speech effects. To vowel stress (duration) which leads to song-like effects. And, overall, to tone of voice, the colouration of texture of the poem. Think of velvet, think of silk, or old-men's grating gunny sack. From the Neo-Modern point of view all the above are available to every student who can read because they were learned early on at mother's knee, she at the knee of Mother Tongue. And Primary Stress, which is emphatic emphasis is the leader for the poem on the page or on the stage. The rest is gloss.

When I write an essay, I'm most directly involved with the sentence, the paragraph and as a consequence of these, the composition, which means both put together and bring to rest. From say 1955 to 1978 I worked within a pretty standard essay form. 23 years in the wrong jailhouse (not really) . . . I'm an impressionist who tends to re-enact the work in view rather than simply explicate it. And I found it possible to do this within standard essay form. If someone reads an essay of mine I wonder, did you get the picture, rather than wonder, did you get the point.

AK: Energy via singular meaning?

WT: Yes, if by singular you mean individual. In 1978 for various reasons I began to feel everything is composition—put together—so I turned to letters, sketches, notes, even posters. In a letter to Jenny Shaw (composition) I included a 5-page collage of passages by various poets apropos roses (composition). Then billie bissett, his publisher *Talonbooks*, and the Canada Council got mutually in Dutch with parliament which holds the money strings. We realized it would take a lot of people speaking with one voice from the west to get parliament to lay off. We obtained more than 400 signatures at $10.00 per name, and that was a vital part of the composition. We consulted with Karl Siegler, David Robinson, Peter Hay, Taki Bluesinger, bill and several other poets as to the form and wording, and that was a vital part of the composition. We arranged some dinners and a hoopla night at the Scandia, and that was part of the composition. We sent copies to every member of parliament, to various newspapers—Bill French at *The Globe and Mail*, etc. And I wrote a flock of letters, all parts of the composition. And it worked, helped get parliament off bill's back. All in all it took six weeks and I'm as pleased with the ad as with solo essays I've written. Shortly before, summer '78, I wrote "A Necessary Politics for Stan Persky." Again, Jenny Shaw figures and ordinary essay form is out the window. Lots of impressionistic sketching, lots of talking, in a way a kind of speech. The ad came next and then I started up what turned out to be 10 numbers of *The Vancouver Poetry Centre Newsletter*. For me these are another form of collaborative composition with other writers joining in, Charles Watts, Eric Eggerton, bill, George Bowering, Daphne Marlatt, some others. While the *Newsletter* was in progress, I wrote "Treatise on Alcohol," spring 1979, the freest essay I've ever written. A little too free in fact. It gets out of hand, doesn't knit, falls apart. But ways it doesn't come together interest me a lot. When an essay achieves composure, comes to rest, in a sense you're done with it. Last night's sunset was last night, today it is raining. When it doesn't come to rest it stays active in your mind.

AK: Does this relate to the title of one section of "Am in Can," what you call "In the Midst"?

WT: Hand and glove. For a long time (1955-75) I wrote essays essentially on my lonesome, midnight lamp, city sleeping, quiet. But as things went on I chanced into controversy as an evidently all-too-brash American puddling my big grubby Yankee hands into a somehow sacrosanct Canadian literary life. Smudge. So I began to answer back with "A Necessary Politics for Stan Persky." I was

ticked off with Stan, also an American, for playing footsie with Robin Mathews (an enemy of mine) in maddeningly petulant, self-indulgent ways, which was such a comedown from Stan at his ardent best. Then the bill bissett controversy started up and goodbye quiet study. I didn't seek out such involvement. It was chance, various chances, fated perhaps. Chance is of course a mighty mover, steady stream, flows constantly through all our lives. Some turn away. Others grab, and things begin to happen. So I chanced into the midst and immediately felt the need for corresponding writing forms. Most academics, alas, stay inside their ivory-towered studies, out of touch—all those UBC creative writing and English department profs who teach poetry yet pay next to no heed at all to Vancouver poets. I have been "in the midst," and it's reflected in the writing.

AK: And this is consistent with Olson's idea of composition by field.

WT: Yes, and this period of compositional change culminates in summer 1980 when I began to write "Canadian Interiors" for an October Festival of Canadian Poetry which Bob Creeley sponsored, 10 days in Buffalo. I feel this as much the most successful composition of the two-year period, 1978-80. Things I knew from times past, things I was learning, knit together. The impressionist sketching, which has become my mode of writing, begins with word one and goes on in a steady flow to the end, the point of rest, shifting, shifting, shifting pictures.

AK: Yes, the knit-not-knit of de-construction abyssness . . . Robert Creeley figures so prominently throughout your work, also Olson.

WT: Oh, Charles and Bob. Because Charles was 15 years older, loomed physically large 6 ft. 8, and was seemingly paternal, most people see them as father/son or mentor/protégé. I see them as more nearly opposite twins, collaborative—opposite because Charles has the expansive, Bob the compacting mind. Charles huffed and puffed and would write like haystacks in the wind. Bob threaded needles and turned on dimes. For everything Bob learned from Charles, Charles learned as much from Bob. Both had superior passion. I feel closest to Bob who once wrote, "Your best friend because he says so," and that's reciprocal. Mind you he could write the same thing to at least a dozen others. I'm not in Charles' league at all but Bob and I are also somewhat opposite twins since Bob has an instant mind, like yours—Jenny had one too—and my mind tends

to mill around. Allen Ginsberg says "first thought best thought" and that's the way Bob writes his poems, most of them one draft only. A paragraph of mine usually goes through 8 or 10 revisions. And Bob's New England to the core while I'm a west coast type who doesn't have a core at all except my sensibility which has its source in family life, growing up. My mother has a most sweet voice, you know, at the knee of Mother Tongue. So from the first I've felt sympatico with Bob and in these transient lives we lead, jet rides swinging at our wrists, we've spent a lot of time together. In the back and forth of it he's been the chief luck of my literary life. In this respect I've been a very lucky man. Many others figure in, but Bob's mind is such an extraordinary marvel, as ordinary as they come, like light from a simple candle that endlessly illuminates this human house in which we live, his troubles ours, our troubles his. And as such he casts light on Allen Ginsberg, Robert Duncan, Ed Dorn, Robin Blaser, John Chamberlain, Marisol, Ron Kitaj, Jim Dine, many there in his huge company of friends.

AK: "One and/ one, two,/ three."

WT: Yes, well, "A Piece" has been pervasive in my writing since fall 1985 when you came along. It's a lynch-pin for everything I mean when I say Neo-Modern. Among other things, it's something you can apply to relationships. One and one, can be one person and another person. And as two together they are more than when they were separate one and separate one. What they are as two, becomes the third.

AK: Like Donne's, "Extasie," "We two one another's best . . ."—or a Peircian bringing of "secondness" and "thirdness" in *relation* to each other.

WT: Yes, Adeena, yes, their twoness creates relationship whether it's a marriage, a friendship, an enmity, parent/child, patient/doctor, worker/boss. And what eventuates will be unpredictable until it happens.

AK: How exactly does this fit into the Neo-Modern?

WT: I'm only pointing to Bob's profound instinct for what is common, that which we share and can study in the schoolhouse of our lives. As such he's the poet of common cause, imaged as simplicities which all may share. His syntax can be formidable, a kind of simple intricate, but what's in view are occasions we all know, a

husband sitting at a table, his wife is picking up a cup, in a room their child is crying, in a house across a field lots of lights and distant laughter, at grandma's years ago, "go home" he says, she lights a candle, a focal point for the moonlight in the fields. And he lit up places everywhere. Ed Dorn shares Bob's instinct for such common places. But it's overtly in Bob's bones and breath while Ed has to consciously get past a meagerness in Illinois while growing up.

AK: Let's get back to your writing for the moment. For the most part you seem to be writing for women, but there always seems to be a male counterpart. A type of opposition striving for true friendship . . . Oh those binaries . . .

WT: Sure, when I talk to you as poet, voice of silk, revealing cloth, I almost invariably bring in male counterparts: your poems and Creeley's, yours and Allen's, yours and bill's, yours and Barrie's and more recently Colin Browne's and Steve McCaffery's. Because language is androgynous. Both male and female. Barrie Nichol's great at this. He has father poems, mother poems, sister poems, brother poems and both male and female friends.

AK: Also he plays with the sexuality of the language, celebrating not just in seduction, desire, the suspended play, anticipatory disease, but in the composition of the letters, their physical makeup, as in *ABC: The Aleph Beth Book*, where he experiments with the play of light through the letters, their collapsing into themselves, into others; reminiscent of the Kabbalistic concept of the Aleph (which is seen as a black hole consuming all of the other letters).

WT: I agree. Barrie's H has spiritual significance for him at the same time that it's an emblem, as well as a signature of physical being. But in regard to the androgynous, I think male poets seek a feminine presence in their writings and that female poets seek a masculine presence. This can occur at the level of sex, of sensibility, of imaginative power. Thus an extreme feminist who denied a masculine presence in the language would be as mistaken as an extreme masculinist who denied a feminine presence. Emily Dickinson's passionate unfulfilled love for several men in her life achieves fulfillment in her poems, their presences hovering as she writes. It's even more conspicuous in all those ways H.D., very much the feminist, was bisexual in her behaviour. I'm not suggesting that women poets in our time should follow suit. Richard Aldington's

betrayals pushed her there unwillingly and with devastating pain from which Bryher rescued her on Corfu. But her poems pioneer the language as androgynous as she sought out foremost men to augment her writing powers just as shy Emily wanted to in sparse New England. Foremost was Aldington, as was D. H. Lawrence, as was insistent Sigmund Freud, pounding fist on famous couch when he told her, "The trouble is that you don't love me." The other side of the coin would be Lawrence's equally remarkable, equally seductive friendships with a long parade of challenging women who augment his writing powers. And Gertrude Stein's powerful visual imagination draws on her friendships with Picasso, Matisse, Braque. All of this points to a male/female duality in the language. It's a yearning which, if denied, will inhibit writing power. H.D. the most extreme instance of duality, up to and including constant torment, is also perhaps the most important woman poet since Emily Dickinson, in whom the same dilemma maintains a constant presence like muffled heartbeats.

AK: Let's shift to your writing style. I've noticed that when you talk of it you almost invariably bring in Matisse, especially his drawings. Why is that?

WT: It began not deliberately on my part but as circumstance. For various reasons I was writing essays which included not one but a number of works and writers. In the D.H. Lawrence essay, 1955, I included five novellas. In "Wolf in the Snow," I work with five modern Canadian novels. In the introduction to "New American Story" I work with 10 writers. In "Wonder Merchants," my account of poetry in Vancouver 1960s, I work with maybe 15 contemporary poets. Originally I didn't like it, dear G-d, why not a single writer, single novel, single poem. As it was, all I could do was sketch each in with a paragraph or two. Well, comes the day, comes the dawn. At a certain point I began to like such sketching, little pictures in the hallways. All kinds of possibilities. I've already cited myself as an impressionist, my thought being, not will the reader get the point, but will the reader get the picture. I've always loved Matisse. He's always been my special painter. And, as you mention, particularly his sketches. They're an altogether marvel. Just a line a line a line and there they are. Especially his women, as Bob Creeley says "dressed, undressed or partly." It's all very physical but in Matisse it is their being that shines through. Some women naked, very sexy, some naked under silk kimonos, some fully dressed, reading books or looking pensive, hand on cheek, upswept hair or tumbling down. And always the surround of flowers, peasant

blouses, bright green skirts. And always, in the midst of it, the very person that they are.

AK: Essential her.

WT: Exactly. Her/self is there in an extraordinary economy and fluency of line. Trying to account for it, the mystery, I once flashed on his hand "in the hand of G-d." I think of that little church in Venice, itself worship simplified, the interior as an architectural sketch. But always rendered physical, the various selves his women are "bodied forth." So when I sketch George, Daphne, Victor Coleman, Glady Hindmarch, Robin Blaser, Robert Kroetsch, or Barrie, Matisse is always on my mind as the best of all possible instances of how to do it.

AK: In order to do this you've got to have direct impressions. An unmediated energy transfer. Dwell with it/them. And you do, as when you read. The language as vehicle?

WT: As Henry James in *The Art of Fiction* says, an artist is one who has a capacity for "direct impressions of life." Again at the close of his great poem, "The Finger," Bob says it best for all time,

—it
it—

They get me in the solar plexis, sunlight place, where thought begins. As, when we saw "A Fish Called Wanda" I didn't have a clue what was going on. Some den of thieves. But that mount and mount of demented people was pure delight and Cleese the master. When you asked why was Wanda living with the stutterrrrrr I didn't have a clue, I couldn't tell. I just loved his stuttering. Likewise, her so-called brother at the window or behind the door, checking up on her sex life. Nor did I know why she double-crossed John Cleese in the courtroom. But from his *look* I could tell he was beyond all caring just to get his hands on her, demented man, demented wife. And her poor stutterer having to squash all those little dogs he loved just to ggggetttttt that old lady off the scene and thus protect his so-called friends who were selling him down the river. Later on, I got the point that Fish Wanda was a mermaid, luring men to their destruction with her siren songs of sex. Such impressions can be a problem. Times I walk along the street and pick up on a woman whose approaching say 100 feet away. If I hold my hand up and she's a sender I get direct pressure on my

palm. By the time she passes me I can be so horribly embarrassed. What's to do with the look on her face, way she walks, the clothes she wears, the grey Sukey sweater, your Robert Creeley coat, what to do, should I stop her, tell her what I know: "So that's the way it is with you." Have to shift my eyes away. An impact that has no occasion. Direct, direct, she walks by. it/it. And it goes on. On up the street here comes a man, full of anger, woe begone. Point is it's how I read and write. First the impression, then fish around for the corresponding thought. What I liked best with Wanda were the impressions at the solar plexus level.

AK: Worn in the sunlight midst . . . How close are direct impressions to what you mean by Body English?

WT: Very. Body English is Charles Olson territory again, sensibility within the organism. Because my awareness of things is overwhelmingly physical, I can't speak or think without sometimes rather disjointed movements of hands, arms, head, legs—Charles' "wild reachings." In reading aloud, for instance, when no particular Body English is exerted from within, the reading may be skillful but it won't have physical impact on listeners. When a lot of Body English is exerted there can be direct physical contact with tuned-in listeners.

AK: Lorca's *duende*? Atche in Inuit . . .

WT: Very much so. Olson loved Lorca and Lorca's *duende* is earth's Body English (Spanish) working through a dancer, singer or instrumentalist. Body English is the body's power working through the voice as instrument.

AK: The poem bodied forth.

WT: Yes. It alters Shakespeare's famous "imagination bodies forth the shape of things unseen" to the *voice* bodies forth . . . physical speech. On the tape of you reading in Cranbrook, November '88, I get that piano sense of your voice's range and in places the feel that you've gone out of your mind, that the Body English has taken completely over as it, in a sense, reads you. Wild gypsy. Denise Levertov can exert tremendous body English, velvet, but it's subject to her ingrained British sense of propriety. But she and Ginsberg, Zukofsky too, I would think your Russian Jewish gypsy self has direct affinities with theirs—since I believe the Jewish Homeland

is not the state of Israel but your Zion of imagination, science, intellect and art.

AK: Actually, I believe it's in both. That's why I love travelling so much. The exhilaration of constant movement. In exile. Movement for its own sake, a presence measured by how fast we pass. As bp knew, entranced along his cont(in)ent, not reaching toward some destination but in flux, each stop only serving as a foundation, as in a type of Barthesian code. I think Allen also has this desire, the wild celebratory statements, moving moving, but with foundation, as the "who" serves in *Howl*. Denise less so, rebelled against her father's Kabbalistic work. Her vessels, kitchen vessels. But with Zukofsky, his language is alive; his Biblical transliterations ecstatic with eternal mysteries of alphabetic combinations. Topographical mysteries that call for a continuous coding and decoding.

WT: Yet Louis is the supremely domestic man, stay at home with wife and son, whereas Denise is endlessly on the move. And, as you know, I find her voice compels with a much more than simply kitchen resonance.

AK: You mean you experience her as numenous?

WT: When her voice goes velvet yes, or when yours strays into silk. Numenous is perhaps the most blessed state a poet can achieve, full of the glow of earth, the glow of mother tongue, the glow of one's own self, the glow of life—you know, happy, joyful, rapturous, or, in more ordinary terms, Lawrence's "I feel new and eager to start in again." Emanations. bp as radiant. Bob's "Upon his shoulders/he places boulders/and on his eye/the high wide sky." I always thought Bob meant the boulders as burden. He said, "oh no, it feels great." Wearing earth and sky.

AK: While we're in this area, what do you mean by your "use" of the word synchronicity?

WT: In a thumbnail sense it's two or more minds with but a single, a simultaneous, a meaningful thought. But it's not thought only. In Boulder, Colorado Bob and I were walking along talking of H.D. Unaccountably paused, Bob noticed on the wall a sign: H.D., Moving Company (the comma is mine). Missoula, Naropa, Cleveland, Buffalo, Toronto. Some mingle or mesh or merge in which what or who is needed arrives on a just-right timetable. Or

lesser instances. Hear a new word in the morning, pick up the afternoon newspaper, there it is. Think of some friend, long time not seen, guess who just blew into town, etc. As we say, out of the blue—beep's colour.

AK: What then are you saying is the difference between synchronicity and coincidence?

WT: It's Jung's term and he connects it with telekinetic events, mind over matter, clocks and keys and window latches. Apropos our subject, I think it happens constantly in writing as the word you need, known or unknown, comes to hand just when you need it. The more alive the writer the more frequent such occurrences. The more alive the person, likewise, day to day.

AK: Sure, what we open ourselves to, with an all-embracing receptivity, like you with palm waving in the afternoon sky, continuously struck with impressions, impressions, sometimes overwhelming. But, because you have the desire, a mindfulness maintaining an ever-presence that permits the simultaneity of occurrence, involving your world within you and around you . . . Would you call the kind of wake/sleep experiences you've described to me as synchronic? And how do they relate to your writing?

WT: I do have wake-sleep images. It's a kind of inner eye that opens as I'm falling asleep, halfway to dreamland but still awake. The images are usually about six inches out. Usually it's simply an open eye (minds are closed) or a face looking left from my viewpoint, or in half-profile, still looking left, or sometimes full-face, looking directly at me. Only once have I had a face in profile looking right. Sometimes I know them, usually women. Sometimes it's faces I don't know but am convinced are in the world, somewhere. Sometimes they're scarey, grotesques, other times extraordinarily beautiful. Some change as the image holds. Years ago, in succession I saw seven different Jenny Shaws, all Jenny. I see landscapes through which I'm gliding forward along curving roads, at nighttime, with light above, luminous, not of this earth. I see city streets and people walking on those streets, and I know I haven't been in those cities and don't know those people but feel convinced, real city, real people, right now. The image I'm still gone on was spring 1986, a diamond shaped pendant with five sides. They're open and all the stars in the sky are pouring thru and

pouring thru and it's unspeakably beautiful. I'd been writing you a letter.

To answer your questions, no I don't think it's synchronic. Circumstance poses questions. The images answer if I could only read them. Had one of Bob once, fallen from some height to pavement, dead, his jaw shattered sideways. Had the thought, "Well, this'll save him," danger passed. There isn't a direct influence on my writing style or subjects. But I think they keep my awareness of things open to ideas of the wonderful. I do write about them in letters. Some sketches bear a similarity. Perhaps I could say they hover at the shoulder of my writing.

AK: Warren, let's get back to more familiar ground if we can. You always insist on the personal, someone to write for.

WT: You can say that again. I can't imagine writing that isn't personal, it would be like having friends you make a point of never seeing, never writing, never calling. Most of what I wrote in 1978-79 is unthinkable without Jenny Shaw and bill bissett. And most that I've written since 1985 is unthinkable without you and Bob. The woman I'm writing to or for figures as a personal flesh and blood "muse," as is consistent with Olson's "Human Universe." In a way it's goodbye to Egyptian, Greek, Roman divine muses, ways that Freud cuts them down to human size, or Bob in "The Awakening" feeling that God "moves only as I move," or Robin's early on "Christ in Heaven, dance with me." From my view Dante may have made a mistake when he saw divine love in Beatrice's eyes on that bridge and felt no need to see her anymore, get to know her, until he made it up to Paradise and her eyes go multifoliate, the supreme rose of the world. Some feminist should write a novel, "Whatever Did Become of Beatrice?" I much prefer Emily Dickinson telling Charles Wadsworth:

> Nor could I rise—with You—
> Because your face
> Would put out Jesus'—
> That New Grace
>
> Grow plain—and foreign
> On my homesick Eye—
> Except that You than He
> Shone closer by—

They'd judge Us—How
For You—served Heaven—You know,
Or sought to—
I could not—

Because you saturated Sight—
And I had no more Eyes
For sordid excellence
As Paradise

Surely she is saying personal human love is the pathway to divine love. It's my guess, with the three men in her life, she was probably more seductive than say Sewell realizes in his biography. As mentioned when we were speaking of androgyny, there is always the possibility that Emily fell in love with certain men in order to secure a male presence for her poems.

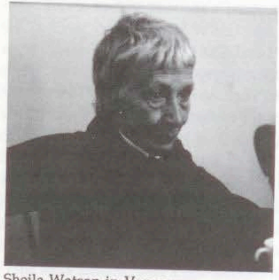
As you somewhat resignedly know, I talk a lot about Mother Earth, Mother Tongue and one's Mother Mine as the three chief muses of Olson's "Human Universe." A poet who has these three lined up will be a major power house, synchronic, numenous, oracular. Speaking of the personal, I really do track my beginnings as a writer to my mother's incredibly sweet Michigan voice and to the cutting edge it had when she got angry with us kids. When we were 11 or 12 she would still haul us up on her lap and sing nursery songs to us. As a tragic orphan child whose dad keeled over with a heart attack when she was four and whose mother suicided out when she was seven (couldn't cope), mother had vivid memories of childhood happinesses in the midst of the ruins. It wasn't simply the narrative details, though they fascinated me. It was the wistful sweetness in her voice, which her older sister Auntie Florence also had. And I 'm not alone in this, taking Mother Mine as a muse. During the Modern Phase that I've mentioned (1600-1900) I can't find a single poet's mother in their poems, exceptions Walt and Emily. But Post-Modern brought the mamma in: Lawrence's poems for his mother, Williams' poems for his mother, Allen's Kaddish for his ruined mother, Charles Olson's great mother poem, "As the Dead Prey Upon Us," all of Duncan's mother poems, especially, "My Mother Would Be a Falconress," Ed Dorn's poem for his mother in skimpy Illinois, Bob's "Mother's Voice." Other family enters in, Allen's father, George Bowering's grandpa, Barrie's much-loved grandma, Denise's sister, as inspiration for their poems: inspiration—breathing in. If you remember, at Naropa I said absence of a mother's voice—elsewhere, dead, silent, disturbed, angry, denied, baffled—might well be why poets become

poets, somehow make it up to her. A major muse of our time. To this day I'm a complete sucker for certain women's voices, not what they say but ways they say it. Think of velvet. Think of silk. Can't stand nasal, early Atwood, can't stand strident, most theatre voices put me off, pretentious Liz Taylor as Shakespeare's Cleopatra was a joke, and so was Burton as Anthony. But I love certain throaty women sometimes with a snarl for things. Let me put it this way, a so-called impersonal or objective writer is simply *that kind of person*. His cool or cold eye is just as personal as what Creeley calls "the kind of eyes of Allen." Difference is, the one who casts the cold eye will see less. Olson had great big warm goopy *near*-sighted eyes which he would characteristically bring to bear within forward-leaning inches of whoever he was talking to. And from that huge chest of his an utter closeness of his voice, the whale, resource, hot living oil for the lamps of others, light. As Robert said and Creeley quotes, "Love lights light in like eyes." Primary stress: "Love *lights* light in like eyes" . . . "Love lights *light* in like eyes" . . . "Love lights light in *like* eyes."

By the Time I Got to University

Sheila Watson visited Simon Fraser University as a special guest of "The Coast Is Only a Line," a conference/festival held during the weekend of July 23-25, 1981. In the final session of the conference portion of the weekend, she shared a panel discussion called "Criticism and B.C. Writing" with Warren Tallman, Eli Mandel and Fred Wah. What is excerpted here is an extended response to a request that she talk about the intellectual climate of literary studies during her student days in the late 1920s and early 1930s at the University of British Columbia.

Special thanks to Carol Andrews for assistance in transcription and editing. RM



Sheila Watson in Vancouver, October 1982

By the time I got to the university, D. H. Lawrence had just died. So all the young revolutionaries were going around with bootleg copies of *Lady Chatterly's Lover* under one arm, Hemingway under the other, and going down to the Hotel Europe in Vancouver, thinking we had to kill our man, or catch our prostitute, or do some ineffable deed before we could write. For years when I finally became a teacher, or at least when I finally taught more or less adult students, there were always people who were trying to shock me with the texts of D.H. Lawrence; as if somehow I wouldn't really understand the texture of life that he talked about. I objected to D.H. Lawrence not because I thought he was obscene, or exciting, but simply because I didn't think he knew what love *was*—that he was fighting against his own positivist and puritan inhibitions—and I still think so. And I think that what has afflicted Canadian writing, and perhaps Canadian criticism, is its attempt to extricate itself from a

positivist culture, which defined literature in terms of realism. I mean, for instance, Zola was [for critics] the great naturalistic writer. He's not a naturalistic writer at all! He's deconstructing, if you want to use contemporary terms; every Zola novel is a deconstruction of an earlier story. *Ulysses* had been written then; we read *Ulysses*—had to get it via friends in the States at that time, but you got it. *There* is a total work of deconstruction, but you still have critics, Canadian and American, who keep on talking about Bloom as if he were the man next door, and Molly as if she was being a little indiscreet in creaking the bed and crying out so you heard her though the window, and so on. They're not people in that sense at all; they are *deconstructions* of previous writing and previous criticism. In the end, you don't even know whether what took place in *Ulysses* ever happened, or whether it just happened in Bloom's mind through his suspicion, if he had a mind—since he's a different construct in every section of the novel; he is submitted to a different style and his style is modified by that expression—or whether Molly is inventing it, if she could invent it. Yet in 1960, 1965 (I was reading the *James Joyce Quarterly*) there were still people talking about *Ulysses* as if it were fundamentally what was called a naturalistic novel, if such a thing existed outside of a few minor writers like the Goncourts in France who tried to do it—and failed, I think—who pitted themselves against Flaubert . . . I think that the naturalistic novel, as it is defined, is a critical myth; it doesn't represent a *real* creative reality.

In 1930-31, when I was at U.B.C., we made no distinction between American writers and British writers. We didn't read Canadian writers, because in one sense they fell back into a category that felt itself tied to something else. I think there are still everywhere the struggles against naturalism—I mean it wasn't this country but Darwin that afflicted Pratt. And I would rather meet a killer whale than Darwin. So one has these problems. But part of my experience in B.C. was reading Pound when he was just writing the *Cantos*, reading Eliot before he wrote the *Four Quartets*, reading Faulkner, reading Dos Passos, reading Hemingway. That was as much a part of my life in B.C. as encountering a pufflehead in one of the lagoons on Vancouver Island. So what seems to preoccupy me, and what I'm looking for—I started out in life by trying to find out that the straight line wasn't the shortest distance between two points. And now I want to know what the ontological significance of a sigh is, if you want, or an idea in the cultural context, no matter where it comes from. I mean Northrop Frye is a phenomenon that you have to encounter; George Bowering is a phenomenon that you have to encounter, and when

you encounter him, you have to see his . . . well I was going to say, the shape of his lips. Seeing that everybody else was getting out quotations, and I didn't have much by me since all my books are packed, I hastily opened the beginning of *Burning Water* again and I read this:

> 'Surely you would not deny me the nourishment I require to take my place as a full man of the tribe?'
> These young ones could be pretty tiresome. Full man of the tribe. Talk talk talk.

And then a little later on, this is right at the beginning of the novel:

> 'Maybe, then, it is a vision that rightly belongs to another people entirely. . .'
> 'An interesting thought, but the fact is that it has been revealed, in the present case, to *us* .'
> 'Then you do think there is something to facts?'
> 'Of course. But facts can only lead us to visions.'

One of the things that seemed to me as a teacher (if you think of being a teacher, if that happens to be where God has flung you in the structure of things) is that you have to realize that literature is a revelation. I mean, it's no use to me to say to someone (I used to do it just to get a reaction, I'd say), "Look, bud . . . Virginia Woolf, and Wyndham Lewis, and James Joyce were not *my* age. They were born—and I looked pretty old to them then—the same year that my *mother* was born, in 1882. They've been around a *long time*, but you couldn't have encountered them in 1882"—well, I guess they didn't have much to say except primal remarks then. But every generation—and generations are getting closer and closer, as we say, if one wants to accept that cliché, because print and media make things more accessible, unless they become so encumbered with themselves that they cease to do that. It is no use saying "I was deprived," because every generation has to get its nourishment as it comes. And quite obviously a response of someone who studied Joyce in 1930, or Pound in 1930-31, is not going to be the same response as that of a person who was born into a completely different set of circumstances.

As for regionalism, I have been reading Phyllis Webb's *Wilson's Bowl*, which I admire very much, and part of the reason I suppose is that she, in her subtle way—subtle is not the word I want, rather that clarity she has—recalls to me something that

might mean nothing to anybody else. And that was Wilson Duff himself, and his work on stone images. She also goes back and remembers—and I can argue about leftist movements in B.C. in 1928-29. When the Depression started, and people were being whipped off the Cenotaph, off the streets of Vancouver with bull-whips by the police who I think were provincial then (I don't think they were federal), and the Mayor, a man named Gerry McGeer, "Uncle Gerry," was reading the Riot Act off the foot of the Cenotaph. So I can remember the C.C.F. when it was the League for Social Reconstruction and when the darling little man with white, curly hair called Mr. Thomas kept clutching us by the lapels, or whatever we had to clutch, saying, "There's nothing for it but bombs in the mailboxes. There's nothing for it but *deconstruction*!" [Laughter and applause from audience]

So, then, I have a friend Fred who is half my age—whom bpNichol knows—who lives in Toronto. He somehow had insight into the way the Devonshire Hotel was demolished, and he said that in order to demolish the Devonshire Hotel, the demolishers (who are not Tepperman, whose ball I got so used to in Toronto), had to get the original plans of the Devonshire Hotel and study every detail of the construction, so they could blow it up so that it fell inward, and didn't fall outward, killing people. Maybe that is what deconstruction in critcism has to do. The act of deconstruction is not just a putting of bombs in the mailboxes; it's a study of a structure that you can get out of the way so you can build something else which may be worse, or better, depending on the imagination of the person. I mean, if somebody blew up Simon Fraser University, it would probably be built the same way again by the very people who blew it up!

So it seems to me then about B.C.—I mean people lived here, they thought, they brought books with them from different cultures. If you're contemptuous of those cultures, you're caught in your own traps, because you're not going to have access to all of them. I'm not going to read Russian before I die. You know there are all the things you think: "Can I die without doing this?" When I was young, I thought, "Well damn it all, I'm going to die without reading Kant. No one's going to make me"—that's what you had to read philosophically—"and I'm going to be deceptive about it!" So I think we frighten ourselves into not taking the whole of our surround into consideration or to know that it's changing.

And that's why, since Eli spoke about Northrop Frye, I would like to say something about Marshall McLuhan, who was not a critic of Canadian literature. He didn't think it existed, really, and you could get angry with him about that; but his whole

exploration of technology came from his study of contemporary writing beginning with Mallarmé, and Joyce, and Pound and various of the writers who were more or less contemporary with him. He maintained that the poet really understood the world before the builders did, and in that sense they were responsible for its direction. Their awareness was absolutely *essential* to the culture. I was reading in the Dudek book [*Louis Dudek: Texts & Essays*, eds. Frank Davey and bpNichol, *Open Letter*] a very harsh criticism of McLuhan, a criticism of the fact that he was a technological determinist, which was anything but the truth. And strangely enough, McLuhan drew his greatest image from American literature, from Poe, the image of the maelstrom; it was drawn right from literature. That was his central image, the image that Wyndham Lewis and Pound together—and there are all sorts of critical arguments about who said what; who said it first; who said it last; who said it imperfectly; who could have said it better—found in the vortex, which is an interest, to some extent, in the maelstrom, like the interest in the virgin and the dynamo. All those images, and the effects that technology was going to have on a "cross language," and what it was going to do to language, or what language could do to *it*. And in one sense, I've always felt that against a certain amount of mysticism, Pound's essential "Lockean-almost" belief (and I think typically, and culturally, American in that sense) was that *a word should say what it means*. In other words, don't say you're the executive-director, when you are bossed by somebody else. Society is corrupted by the *misuse* of terminology, and people have been reading it. I mean you have been reading it. You come to it on your own, to as much of the culture as you can assimilate, and then have to confront that as the maelstrom. That may mean you want to get out of it as in the Poe story, or as Wyndham Lewis maintained about the vortex: be able to keep an upright position in the void at the centre of the vortex.

mother poems

•

why she can't write *the mother*,
though she has birthed two children,

spends half her day feeding clothing
sheltering them,

picking up dirty rolled up socks
cooking macaroni,

though she has stretched herself thin,
scarred skin over bloated belly,

watched leftover blood shoot clotted
like fists from her emptied womb,

though she's exhausted herself, black
& blue, many times

mothering the goddamn fucking world

why she can't write herself around
that,

why she can't put down simply,
i am the mother,

& leave it like that

•

blackbirds, green ash, purple
fireweed.

by the river she sat down & wept,

the weeds keeping her company,
when he would not.

the sky sometimes a delicate pink
like the petals of the roses from
Elizabeth.

such a tiny life in the scheme
of things.

the children banging their bicycle
locks against the bridge railing,

their extraordinary carnival of
grief, in the night,

against the dying universe, against
absent mothers,

against the failure of fathers.
merci.

how the world becomes green again
on the banks of a brown river,

in the mud. green grass. blackbirds.
the air full of singing.

•

the great dark rush of mothering,
the pleasure in it,

the deep need, the suck, the *give,*
give, give, give, give of it.

your hands won't let them go,
you clutch the air

wildly after them —so soon after
they've taken their fill,

slit open your belly, trampled
your sheets,

wanting to be gone.

the color mothers see most often
is red:

remembering, fiercely, in the
night, tiger's eyes,

firelight, the slight parting of
tall grass, cat's feet,

eyes narrowed into slits, claws
poised, ready to kill.

marauders, intruders, every
dangerous outsider.

the fathers for not being there
when it mattered,

the children's spectacular
hit & run.

themselves in the mirror for
the woman in them,

when what they needed was
warriors, guns,

hand grenades, the whole world
burning.

•

you felt it in December
as annunciation,

the birth that would change
the world,

the wonder of new bones
& skin inside you,

fluttering, miraculously,
in your womb.

(no one was there to anoint
you, white robed,

with perfume & flowers.)

you forgot, through that winter,
in the sweetness

of the beginning, the bitter
end:

the sacrifice of the mother,
in absentia,

the martyrdom of the god.

you thought somehow in April
with your child

you would transform the
earth.

screaming at night in
the apartment,

stifling hot in July, you
weren't big

or pure, or beautiful
enough

to change things, you
weren't

the perfect mother.

in your heart's cry
you wanted

a woman holding you,
crooning

a child's lullaby.

Fuchs du hast die Gans
gestohlen,

gib sie wider hehr,
gib sie wider hehr.

(translation, from a German folksong:
Fox, you have stolen the goose,
give her back, give her back.)

Self on Self: Robert Kroetsch Interviewed

July 10, 1986, pouring rain, the windshield wipers swishing back and forth, we began the interview on the drive through the city to Simon Fraser University. Kroetsch recalled his childhood in Heisler, Alberta and the personal circumstances that fuelled his desire to become a writer. This interview makes up section one, "The Early Years."

On campus, Kroetsch met with a group of students and guests, including Fred Wah and George Bowering, and was interviewed on his experience as a teacher at Binghamton, N.Y. and the composition of his long poem *Field Notes*. A shortened version of this interview is presented in section two, "Open Interview." Readers who are interested in listening to the entire session will find the tape in Special Collections, S.F.U. Library.

The following day, July 11, Kroetsch gave a day-long reading of the whole of his long poem *Field Notes*, including *Field Notes 1-8* [volume one] (General, 1981), *Advice to My Friends* [volume two] (Stoddart, 1985), and a book that had just been published, *Excerpts from the Real World* (Oolichan, 1986). As it turns out, with the publication of *Completed Field Notes: The Long Poems of Robert Kroetsch* (McClelland and Stewart, 1989), what he read that day, spoken of then as in process, was the nearly "completed" (doesn't the word fit uncomfortably?) work, minus only "Spending the Morning on the Beach" and "After Paradise," the two shorter pieces that conclude *Completed Field Notes*. The tape of this reading is also available in Special Collections.

On July 12, Kroetsch flew back to Winnipeg, but on the way to the airport we managed to pick up a few loose ends in a hasty and haphazard interview. Excerpts from this conversation, at times considerably edited, are included to round out his brief visit.

My thanks to Kurtis Vanel, Sound Technician at S.F.U., for recording the "Open Interview" and the day-long reading, and to Susan MacFarlane for the initial transcription of the interviews from which this printed version has been edited. My thanks also to Robert Kroetsch for collaborating on some changes to the final drafts, and for providing a few photos to go with the interview.

One: The Early Years

Driving through Vancouver, up to Simon Fraser University . . .

Roy Miki: I'd like to begin by having you speak about the bio/graphic Robert Kroetsch—the self that is always being transformed into fiction, and the fiction that is always transforming the self. I've read a number of interviews and, as much as some people would like you to do, you don't talk *about* the finite self. Is this something that you avoid consciously?

Robert Kroetsch: No, I was never asked—like the virgin who, when somebody asked "Why are you a virgin?" replied "Nobody's ever asked."

RM: I looked up Heisler in my 1924 atlas. It had a population of 133.

RK: Is *that* right?

RM: You were born in 1927.

RK: So the population went up that year! Heisler was only founded 70 years ago this year—1916. They held a big celebration this July. The railway had just gone through that area, but my dad was already there. He and his father, brothers, sisters—not all of them—had come out from Ontario. I think they started migrating about 1905. Because they had a water mill in Ontario, they would move gradually, first the father, then the older sons, and so on. My dad was younger, so he stayed in Ontario and then came out about 1910.

RM: You've said that your father maintained a sense of the east as Edenic, so that the west was, I don't know what you'd call it, not an . . . exile? Would that be a term?

RK: Well, it wasn't an exile. He grew up and left about age 17, which I think is a very vulnerable age at which to leave home, and he wanted to be a big farmer. That was the dream in that Bruce County area where he lived in Ontario. He came out west to homestead but he had this vision of a green world back there. They had a big mill pond—it's still there as a matter of fact—and it was

a very idyllic world in a curious way, because of the water, fishing, all kinds of big trees. And to come on to the prairies—it was parkland actually—was a big change for him. But, you know, in a strange way my father was a completely realized man, in the sense that as a kid he wanted to go out west and be a big farmer—and that's what he was. He wasn't impatient with somebody who couldn't decide, but he couldn't understand why people weren't *fulfilled* in this sense. He became a curious model in my life: a man who had really *done* what he wanted to do. The whole 20th century notion of people as unfulfilled was totally alien to him.

RM: There's this figure of your father in the second last poem of the *Stone Hammer Poems* . . . retired, yet with a real desire for labour—for work. Is that an accurate portrait?

RK: Yes, I think so. What he really knew was the land and farming. In fact, I think what he really liked was farming with horses; when tractors came in, he was already starting to lose interest. I suppose even *The Studhorse Man* [1969; General, 1982]—a novel where you get that transition from horses to internal combustion engines—was partly a response to my father's faith.

RM: Your mother was born in the area?

RK: Yes, her father had come out in 1902 from Minnesota. My mother was the first child in the family born in what was then the District of Alberta—1903. Neither of my parents had much formal education, so their whole sense of the world was shaped by landscape and by farming. My mother was totally at home in that environment.

RM: She was native to the place and your father came from the east, so there was a mixture of the two.

RK: That's right, I had a sense of the difference between the two, my dad often planning trips back east, or "down east"—to go back *home* in a curious way. He was thinking he was going back home, whereas my mother was at home.

RM: Well, how long were you in Heisler then, as a child?

RK: Okay, I was born June 26, 1927. I was the oldest child and the only son; I had four sisters after. I was there until grade 12. I went

away in 1944 to go to high school because they didn't have grade 12 in my area.

Robert Kroetsch as a child in Heisler, Alberta

RM: So you have a very continuous and long period of your childhood in one particular place.

RK: Oh, one particular house. I think I've told the story before, but I was quite astonished and hurt when I found out that people buy and sell houses.

RM: No kidding.

RK: "House" was like a part of your body almost. This was *you*. I still have trouble in a city where people say, I can sell this house and make a certain profit and move into another area." My sense of "rootedness" was terribly upset—and I have become a kind of vagabond in my life.

RM: I was just going to point to that: you're on the move more than any single Canadian writer I've ever talked to. Reading *The Crow Journals*, it's almost every other day.

RK: Oh, there was a time when I was on, I think, 75 flights in one year.

RM: Yet you had this long continuous period of your childhood in one spot. How far back can you remember in your childhood? What's your earliest memory and what's your sense of self in that environment?

RK: Well, you know, my dad had a big farm—for horse farming it was quite huge (900-1,000 acres)—and of course my parents were quite busy. They were very attentive parents but farmers work hard. So I had an incredible sense of freedom which I think governs my response to the world to this day, and any kind of infringement on that kind of freedom to think, to dream—I was a very dreamy

kid. They used to tease me about it. I was always daydreaming, because I realize now I was very much a story maker. I had made up a little cosmos of my own that I lived in which had elaborate narratives in it of the inhabitants and so on.

RM: Was it essentially oral, that is, you're making it up without the context of books?

RK: Yeah, that's right. Well, it might have been influenced by my reading, but it was very much about place, and I would populate it. It was a willful, wonderful reading and mis-reading of my own environment. There were still lots of sloughs around, lots of clumps of poplar, lots of undeveloped farmland and so on, so I could wander around.

RM: It seems your parents were actually quite loose with your wanderings. Sometimes kids born into farming homes talk about the amount of work they had to do: the constant family chores that had to be done. And you could escape that?

RK: I was known in the community for being . . . lazy, was one word, because in the farmers' eyes I didn't work. I was daydreaming much of the time. Also my parents . . . well, I guess my mother didn't want me to be a farmer. She was quite happy to have me reading books and daydreaming. I think that the real truth is that my mother was letting me—I was good in school, as they say, and I was left alone. I'll give you an example: I was a kid in the early '30s, so there were a lot of unemployed people around. My mother hired an unemployed school teacher as her hired girl but half her job was to teach me. So I, in a sense, had a little kindergarten experience out on the farm. I was a real pain in the ass for the teacher when I went to grade one because I had learned this stuff I wasn't supposed to know.

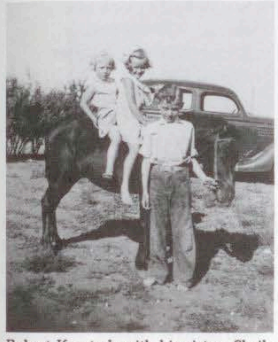
RM: So your memory of imagining and fictionalizing the place goes right back to your childhood.

RK: There was another factor for my not working on the farm: I had allergies to certain kinds of dust, so there were certain jobs I couldn't do. I had trouble working around wheat for instance, because wheat dust really made me sick. That's why, even when I did work, I got the odd jobs. One thing was gardening of course, because I could work in the garden. I loved gardening, and I planted a lot of trees. Or I would go out, ride a horse and go check on cattle. Many of those jobs

were, in a certain way, solitary jobs. You had a lot of labour in those days. We'd have maybe two hired men, a lot of the time, and they liked working together, and they liked to talk while they worked. And I was left doing some of the isolated jobs, so again, it reinforced my sense of living with my imagination but in the landscape.

RM: What was the landscape like around Heisler?

RK: Well, first of all, it's what they call "parkland," which is a prairie with clumps of poplar on it, slightly rolling. There was a lot of water in those days, a lot of sloughs still. So there was an incredible population of birds, like ducks and so on.



Robert Kroetsch with his sisters Sheila and Pat, Heisler, Alberta, 1935

RM: It was lush?

RK: Yes, it *was* lush in a strange way, though it didn't have big trees. Poplars are very small. And of course winters were very intense. I lived four-and-a-half miles from school and I went by horse to school all my life; I never had a bus. Every day of my school life I spent 45 minutes going to school in that landscape and 45 coming back.

RM: From the time you started school?

RK: From grade one . . . it was a glorious ride. There were bad days when it was so cold you'd damned near freeze to death . . . There were birds, I guess my obsession with birds probably goes back to that. When I was in grade one a cousin of mine who was a high school student came and lived at our house. Orpha O'Connor was her name—and she would drive me to school. So that's how I started. When I was big enough to drive the horse myself (my younger sisters were with me), I was notorious for not pressing a horse to go fast. In fact, I was famous because every time they gave me a good horse it would get too fat on me.

RM: You're riding in the back.

RK: Yeah, the horse was pulling a four-wheeled vehicle, so you're sitting there driving. In fact, in the winter we had what they called a "closed-in-cutter": it's a little sleigh with a wee little room that you could sit inside. There was a stove in it, a tin can made into a stove, and on the way you'd build a little fire in there. And we would save some of our sandwich and toast it on the way home.

RM: My God, it's another world altogether!

RK: Yes, it really was. You'd get up in the morning—again, my dad spoiled us: he would go out, hook up the horse, and start the fire in this little stove. We'd go out and jump in and then we would drive, and the horse knew the way—I mean, you hardly had to look out the window. And we would sit in there; it was quite toasty and warm. Then we would put the horse in the barn at school, and after I would have to go out and start the little fire and hook up the horse.

RM: Well, what was your relationship with your father then, as a dreamy kid?

RK: I think my father was very tolerant, first of all. I mean, I don't think he ever got mad at me. He was a very important man in the community. He was a very responsible person. He had a tremendous sense of community and of family as well. In a sense, you had to be in the service of the community. But he was puzzled at this son he had somehow or another produced, who liked books and so on.

RM: There was never open conflict?

RK: There was never open conflict.

RM: Puzzlement?

RK: Puzzlement. I suppose when I first went off to university, my father still thought I would come to my senses and come home and take over the farm because he thought any human being who wanted to be happy would take a big farm, and farm! When he finally realized I was never going to do that I'm sure he was disappointed. And also, because my father had realized his own ambitions, he made it difficult for me with my strange dreams of becoming a writer. I suppose I had difficulty really talking to him. It's interesting, my dad was often called "Uncle Paul" in the

community and he had that special relationship of an uncle to many of his nephews and nieces. They could go to him with their problems. But I couldn't, in a way. I had difficulty dealing with his expectations or something, I don't know, but we never had conflicts.

RM: When did you first start thinking of writing as a way of life?

Robert Kroetsch, centre, c. 1943

RK: Well, see, I didn't know there was a career like that until I was in grade 12. But in fact, even going back and forth in the buggy, I used to compose in my head. I would make up a poem just for fun, or songs, cowboy songs even, along with stories.

RM: These weren't written down?

RK: No. Though I *was* writing apparently, because I remember my English teacher in grade 12, when I went off to high school in Red Deer, she said to me (she was a wonderful woman, really, Mrs. Ainsworth), "You're always writing. Did you ever think of writing as a career?" First of all, I thought *everybody* was always writing. I had no idea that this was somehow a perverse activity I was engaged in.

RM: You thought everyone went home and wrote?

RK: Yeah, of course you wrote down your world. If I didn't write it down, I'd at least make lists.

RM: So you recall something like a journal form being of interest?

RK: Yeah, the journal form—as a version of writing.

RM: And was that comment from your teacher a stimulus?

RK: Well, first of all, the teacher said to me, "Have you ever thought of being a writer?" It was total illumination. I never again in my life wondered what to do—I knew I wanted to be a writer. I had no sense that it was difficult. That came later.

RM: What she did was just define it for you.

RK: She defined it for me. She put a name on what I was. Now, when I meet the guys, especially the guys I was at school with—whereas I thought I was succeeding at being one of them, they tell me what a weird duck I was. I met a guy—Mike Krystofiak is his name—he's a labour organizer for the railways. His was the only Polish family in the community. We were good friends, and he has this picture of me as this total misfit who was always thinking about ideas and reading books instead of doing decent things, like upsetting toilets or whatever one was supposed to do. And then another cousin of mine, who I am still very close to, likes to tell stories about my incompetence and what they would call laziness—I would work all day to get out of work. But it's really strange that I didn't think I was strange. Even the people from the first couple years of my university, when I meet them, talk about all the reading I did, and I swear I didn't know I was atypical in some way. If there was a reading list, for instance, I would go to the library and read the reading list. And of course, you know, that's a disgrace, to go read the extra reading for a class!

RM: How important were books in your home when you were a child?

RK: There were very few books in our house. But we had travelling libraries those days, the bus or truck would come around—I don't know how often—with leather-bound boxes full of books. We had a very poor library in the school but the school district had a pretty good library. I remember those things coming like treasure chests. To open one of those and find all those new books. And I would read a book a day for the whole week or two weeks until the next shipment came along.

RM: Were you reading in any particular genre?

RK: No, I just read with utter indiscrimination.

RM: Did you share any of this reading with your mother, in the home?

RK: Well, my mother was very pleased to have me reading, although I don't recall . . . I was very close to my mother. I don't know that we talked about that so much—it's hard to remember.

RM: Your mother died when you were so young.

RK: I was 13 then.

RM: What did the family do, with her absence? Did your dad hold up?

RK: My dad never remarried; he was a very devoted family man. He learned to cook and so on, but I had three aunts in the immediate vicinity. One was unmarried and two were widows. Things were pretty tight financially for them—I guess he would pay them something. They would often come and help out at our house. I guess he was helping them survive too, but I had this sense of being looked after by all these women. I had four sisters, and they, in a sense, got more of the burden than I did when my mother died, I have to admit, because of the notion of "women's work."

RM: How old were they?

RK: My second sister was 10—my God, they were young!—then eight, five and two. When my youngest sister read those poems about my mother, she was overwhelmed, because she hardly knew my mother. I think one of my problems in life—if you want to psychoanalyze me—is that I lived a strange contradiction. My mother died very suddenly, and I guess I have a kind of continuing fear of being abandoned by women. On the other hand, I was looked after by *all* those women. And I was *very* looked after—I mean, I was loved by them. So on the one hand I have this fear of abandonment; on the other hand I have this great sense of—well, I *like* to be looked after by women. I love that total sense of the female community.

RM: That was a very peculiar upbringing to that point.

RK: It *was* very peculiar.

Robert Kroetsch in his baseball uniform, c. 1944

RM: And your father, obviously the strain on him . . .

RK: Well, when I look back, he was an incredibly strong man—he wanted to keep the family together at all costs. And as I said, I was kind of useless on a farm so I lived a very strange life.

RM: Wasn't it unusual to go to university at that time?

RK: I was the first person from that community to go into Arts. People said, "What the hell does that mean—to go for a B.A.?" Because obviously you went to get an engineering degree or to get a teaching certificate.

RM: So that took you to Edmonton.

RK: I went to Edmonton to work on a B.A. Again my father was just totally mystified by what I was studying. What do you study all day if you're in Arts, you know? He was such a totally rural person that he had no idea what a liberal education might be.

RM: By the time you got to university were you consciously writing things?

RK: Yeah, I was.

RM: You wrote as a university student?

RK: I got a job almost immediately on the school newspaper. I wrote a couple of funny things, but I discovered I was too shy to ever be a journalist; that kind of aggressive confrontation you had to have with people was utterly alien to my nature. I loved sitting by myself and worrying about words. But it's very interesting that almost one of the first things I wrote was funny. Then in first year English we had a wonderful teacher: Professor Tracy was his name. I did Chaucer. That you could make stories out of this comic, absurd kind of rural world that Chaucer operates in was a revelation. And of course Chaucer is a master of narrative; I mean, he could make

that old story just zap along. That was a piece of good luck for me. But again, in my family the men and women spent a lot of time sitting around talking. One of the chief forms of entertainment was to go visit relatives. The men would drink beer and wine, and the women would serve up those incredible lunches. And they would talk about family history, or make jokes. Politics in Alberta was pretty heavy duty in those days.

RM: So your family was involved in quite an active community life.

RK: Much of the time you were alone on a farm, but especially on the weekends people would be with cousins and so on. I was very much part of an extended family. I have dozens of first cousins. Many of them were my age, so you would never be alone on a Sunday, you'd be visiting on one farm or another. There were enough kids so that we'd have ball games.

RM: That was a very rich family life.

RK: Oh, it was, very much so.

RM: Your friendships came out of the family structure. Were there very many friends outside of that?

RK: It's funny that most of my friends were first cousins, both male and female. But my closest friend in that community was Floyd Van Slyke. This was after grade five. The school was a public school but it was very Catholic, the community—German Catholic. And he was from a Dutch, I guess, Protestant family and they didn't let him go to school. They taught him at home until he was in grade five. When he came to school he and I became very close friends. We were both interested in, well, a kind of Buck Rogers world. It was the beginning of space travel, in a curious way. It was the fantasy about space travel, and it was funny how that became a kind of a metaphor. He was much more technical than I was. I would imagine the stuff and he would solve the technical problems, like how we were going to get into space. Actually, while the war was on, for a few of the Christmas concerts I wrote plays. They were very nationalistic plays against Hitler and so on. And Floyd would figure out how to stage them. It was really amazing—I would write the script and he would solve all the problems. In one of them, I remember, we had an airplane flying on the stage—ropes and stuff.

RM: The community came out to these?

RK: Oh yeah, the Christmas concert was a big thing and everybody turned out to see their kids doing things. And the main event would be this new play.

Two: Open Interview

At Simon Fraser University, talking with students and guests . . .

RM: Bob, I detect in your writing this impulse toward the West Coast. There's this initial pleasure at landing, moving around the city in a wondrous state, thinking to yourself whether you should be in this kind of landscape or not. Then you pull back, and you head back to Winnipeg and from there, to everywhere else in the world.

There is a westward pull in Bob's work, but for this open interview he has agreed to go south, back to his American experience. He spent 20 years in the U.S. His writing in the 1960s—the fiction—comes out of this period of residency and a teaching position at the State University of N.Y. at Binghamton where, he tells me, he once taught the long poems of William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens. It was a graduate course that he was going to give on the long poems of Wallace Stevens. And what did your chairman say about that proposal?

RK: He said those poems don't make any sense to anyone.

RM: Bob, maybe we can start by getting some sense of why a Canadian writer, one who is obsessed with a Canadian sense of place and who defines his writing against the American example, would end up spending 20 years in the U.S.?

RK: As you said in the opening, I'm always running away from the places I'm going to, so maybe that was the way I was proceeding. Well, it was an accident—I mean, I went to study in the States, to Iowa, because of that writing program there. And in the early 60s you didn't apply for jobs; they came and asked you to teach. Those were the great days. I remember it seemed like too much trouble to fill out the forms to apply for a job so I didn't bother. That's literally the way it was. I got a phone call one day from somebody in Binghamton, N.Y., asking if I would like to teach there. I didn't know where Binghamton was, but there was an old girlfriend I wanted to see in New York city, so I said sure, I would go for an interview. The visit with the girlfriend was an utter disaster, I

might say, but I ended up taking this job in upstate New York. I was only going to stay for two years, because the drift then was westward. Everybody from Iowa went out west, to California, or a place like that. Anyway, I went there to teach, fresh out of graduate school. We taught a first-year course with Homer's *The Odyssey* and Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, two books I had not read, because I was a student of English literature, so I was back to being a student, in a way.

Fred Wah: What year was this?

RK: 1961. And that was one of the great discoveries—discovering that tradition, and in the framework of those two poems, that kind of elaborate narrative. I'm too anti-war to ever get into *The Iliad*; it was *The Odyssey* that really spoke to me. And of course *The Divine Comedy* is that wonderful structure that you want to fill with all the Canadian poets, you know, which level of Hell should they be placed in . . . There was that wonderful vision of the world that Dante had, and I suppose even the quest toward the feminine that you have there, as he moves toward Beatrice . . . so I did see this framework.

Then somewhere quite early in the 60s we went on the trimester system all of a sudden. The State University of New York is a huge structure, with an administration that is somewhere—nobody knows where it is, you just get directives periodically—and it said we had to go on a trimester system, such as you have here [at S.F.U.]. All the senior professors announced they were going to their summer cottages for the summer trimester, so I got a memo saying I was going to teach a graduate course in the summer. Those were not my intentions at the time, believe me. I proposed a course in American poetry, because I was hired to teach American. And that's when I, facing the truth of having to make up a reading list—which is a great exercise, really, in the examination of one's commitments—put *Paterson* on the list. This was not a course on the long poem, but I put *Paterson* on, and the long poems of Stevens. It's all very vague to me, but I suppose the moment of truth in a way was, for me, Williams' insistence on "a local pride." I was very anti-European, against the whole European tradition. I hadn't even gone to Europe at that point in my life, I was resisting it. I was very sympathetic to that American notion of a new world—which is slightly different from the Canadian, I suspect, but I loved that sense the Americans had that it was a new kick at the cat—and then, in Williams, hearing a way to look at my own material, also that notion of "a local pride."

RM: When we were driving up here, I asked Bob about himself—that self that is born in a place and lives in a family and comes to imagine the world and the place he or she inhabits. And Bob told me that during his entire school life he rode to school and back by a horse and buggy, 45 minutes each way. He said he was also into daydreaming (so he never went fast), which meant the terrain was very actual to him.

So there you are in New York, Bob, in a sophisticated urban American university, a Canadian from Heisler asked to teach American poetry to graduate students. Did you find yourself questioning your relationship to that literary material—not just as a Canadian writer, but as someone who grew up in an essentially rural landscape?

RK: Well, I would say that the poetry was interrogating me more than I it. I was quite comfortable reading American literature—I had no trouble with that—but it started asking me questions. And American poetry is very much a landscape poetry. They're much more at ease with notions of landscape than our tradition is, for some reason. Maybe, in a sense, they found a way to read landscape before we did. I read a lot of other long poems, of course, like *The Bridge* (I never was comfortable with *The Bridge* by Hart Crane) and John Berryman's *Dream Songs* (he was somebody I did read very seriously). It was the questions that those poems made me ask about my own experience—see, I didn't think that I would ever be a poet because I was so daunted by the notion of "poet." I grew up with, in high school I guess, this Romantic sense of the poet as a very privileged person in terms of insight or understanding, whereas I always thought of a prose writer as somebody who was just stupid enough to sit at a typewriter long enough to get enough pages . . . I had no trouble with that notion. It was a very slow process by which I admitted that I was secretly a poet. I suppose the person who would reinforce that for me would be Williams, in many ways—though I was also getting on to *The Maximus Poems*, of course, through Olson. [Aside to Fred Wah:] When were you in Buffalo?

FW: '64-'65.

RK: That's amazing, eh! That's when I was . . .

FW: . . . just up the road.

RK: Yeah, and I was going through these same things.

RM: Can you articulate what Williams was then speaking to you about?

RK: I suppose one of the things I liked was that sense of trying to capture our speech—the sense of the American idiom that he was trying to capture and then my sense of how do we could do the same thing with our speech. The second thing was his willingness to look at the ordinariness of life instead of "high subjects"—you know, the many passages in *Paterson* where he's looking at the people in the park, that sort of thing. It's funny how every period gets a set of subjects that become privileged subjects for poetry. Williams was breaking it for me, because—as much as I may have liked say, Yeats—I felt no access to the "poetic" world.

RM: What about *Paterson* as a long poem, a form?

RK: The third thing, I would say, is just that: the movement away from purity of form—whatever you want to call that—his sense of a genre that was wide open and resisting boundaries, willing to incorporate prose. I found that very exciting. I remember the Sam Patch passage: when you came to that in the first book of *Paterson*, it was a great feeling. Again, I haven't really articulated it, but I was very sympathetic to that exploration of the notion of self, because at that time I was violently anti-Freudian. I felt a terrible thing had happened at the beginning of the 20th century when Freud had substituted "id" for "soul," or something like that. That was my version of it, at least. I didn't like the kind of structure that he imposed. I suspect that I would be more sympathetic right now to the post-Freudian people, but it seemed to me, then, that Williams had found a way around that kind of block that I saw posited by Freud. I was also against that whole kind of "investigation of the interior" that you would get in a book even as great as *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by Joyce. Again, Williams seemed to get me around that to a very open sense of what we would loosely call "self."

RM: You mentioned a move away from "purity of form." Could you elaborate on that?

RK: Well, first of all, I was in graduate school—it was not a good time to be there. It was the last stages of New Criticism, in a sense, and we were all New Critics without anyone telling us we were. So we learned to read a short kind of poem—a lyric poem. John Donne—it's amazing how privileged he was as a poet those days,

because he was so difficult and so concentrated. And we had a notion of "poem" and a notion of criticism based on that kind of complexity. We saw the poem as existing all by itself, pure artifact, that self-contained thing. I felt there was something wrong with that, but there was no way out; in a strange way, there was no way around that at that time. And I think the "impure form" of somebody like Williams—also Pound, but Pound was incredibly difficult to read; I did have various shots at teaching Pound's *Cantos*—showed how you could incorporate all that raw material, leave it untouched in a way. I remember that.

RM: In 1972, in an interview with Russell Brown [*The University of Windsor Review*, Spring 1972], Brown asked Bob about his commitment to poetry and whether he's ever thought about writing a long poem. Bob answered "no," but I think you said that you were interested in the critical and technical problems posed by the long poem. So you were interested in the long poem from a critical and theoretical point of view before you ever saw yourself as writing a long poem. You mentioned some of the critical problems. Are there any other areas of the long poem that were interesting in relation to your own writing—your fiction?

RK: I suspect I was, at that time, trying to learn lessons about writing a novel from my study of the long poem. I still am wrestling with problems in the novel. And the long poem was offering me some lessons in that. I was very sympathetic to the whole Black Mountain thing. It's ironic that I discovered these "distant allies" by reading the poets of the West Coast of Canada. Then bill bissett showed up at the "Poet and Critic" conference on the University of Alberta campus in October '69. bissett captivated us with West Coast sound poetry. The young poets Stephen Scobie and Doug Barbour were two of the captives. Eli Mandel and Dorothy Livesay and Margaret Atwood were all on the Alberta campus. Rudy Wiebe was an organizer, along with Dick Harrison—I think it was Harrison who said that "69" explained the poet-critic relationship. I'd flown up from the States to get into the act.

RM: [chuckle]

RK: Anyway, I was looking for solutions to fictional problems by reading the long poem. I saw in Williams and Stevens what I would now call deconstructionist stances. We didn't use that vocabulary then—I was just beginning to get involved in the idea of *boundary 2* with Bill Spanos and we were testing new vocabularies. He was

working out of philosophy, I was working more directly out of poetry . . . I have a feeling I'm being evasive here, I don't know . . .

RM: Well, I asked you earlier about the sense of "exile," and whether being outside of Canada allowed you certain kinds of privileges in your fiction that you may not have had living in Canada. Was this a concern? Didn't you have a desire to return to Canada earlier?

RK: I think I believed that I would return. But, you know, the eastern United States is a very exciting intellectual world. There's such a concentration of population and lots of universities and lots of writers, and it was very satisfying intellectually, though it never appealed to my imagination for some reason—it didn't talk to my imagination as a creative writer. That question of exile . . . it's very tough. You know, a Canadian can "pass" very easily in the United States, because you have the same accent (more or less) and everything. And by that very passing, you don't have to assimilate. It's a curious paradox that the most difficult people to assimilate in the U.S., in a certain sense, are Canadians.

George Bowering: Well, you've got that funny prairie accent here.

RM: Anybody can tell you're from Alberta!

RK: Yeah, once in a while I'd have trouble talking to Manhattan kids; they couldn't understand what I was saying. But there are a lot of funny accents in the States.

RM: I guess what I'm trying to circle around to, is this point at which you begin composing *Field Notes*, and where the long poem form ceases to be theoretical and becomes something that you actually desire; something that fills in a gap, or some area of writing concern that the fiction did not satisfy. So I'm trying to get you to a point where the fiction turns over into the long poem.

RK: Okay, well one day—I think I've written this down in Michael Ondaatje's *Long Poem Anthology*— my Aunt Mary O'Connor in Edmonton gave me that actual ledger of the family's watermill in Ontario, kept in the 19th century, and I did recognize that I had a kind of "William Carlos Williams gift" there—that sense of the "discovered document." And I spent a long time writing that poem *The Ledger* [Applegarth Follies, 1975]. I suppose, in ways, I was learning a technique there. When I got it finished, I recognized that

it wasn't finished: that I had to write a second "half," which would have to be about the west, about my own experience; *The Ledger* was about my father's experience, after all. So at that point I realized I was into a longer structure of some sort. For whatever reason—and I hate this about my own mind; it works in a strange way by binary patterns, and I think that is a very Modernist vice and I'm always resisting it—I do something and then do the opposite. My flirtation with Jung, I suppose, was based on a recognition that Jung talks about the inevitability of that, and that was consoling, though I no longer believe that it's inevitable. So I was in Calgary in 1975, just poking around in the archives at the Glenbow Museum—and I guess I do have an archival instinct—and I found this old seed catalogue. That was like a stroke of lightning. I just knew, looking at that thing, that I had the other half of my poem. There it was, all I had to do was work it out. From there on, it began to elaborate itself.

So, it was when I saw the two halves—*The Ledger* and *Seed Catalogue* [Turnstone, 1977] relating to each other—that I could then immediately say I could compound those two against another two. You see, mathematics gets into it. Well, the epics of the past are so mathematical; they love their mathematics, don't they? They love that pairing, and so on, that's always going on. If they use the number 24 as the basic number, say—or 12 is it, for epic? You can work so many variations on 12, and it becomes a useful structuring device; a way of multiplying.

RM: Did you think, when you had *The Ledger* and *Seed Catalogue*, that you had a completed pair that could have been a book?

RK: No, I think I pretty quickly recognized that I couldn't stop then—given my epic impulse I had to go for 12 at least. I've gone past 12, so now I'm hoping that at 24 I can quit, and that my continuing poem is going to cease at section 24. But there's a prologue that is, or is not, counted into the counting. So then you start to play that little trick on yourself.

RM: "Stone Hammer Poem" became a prologue? How did that come in? You seem to have retreated to earlier poems?

RK: Well, that was a marvelous hindsight I had. I was tempted at one point to frame the whole poem with Indian material, to open with "Stone Hammer Poem" and to end with those Old Man stories which I—how many are there, I forget. Are there twelve? I was going to use those, at that point, as an "end." That was a secret

ending that I had up my sleeve which has also failed somewhere along the line. As I said the other day, you work at every poem until it fails, completely. And then you leave it.

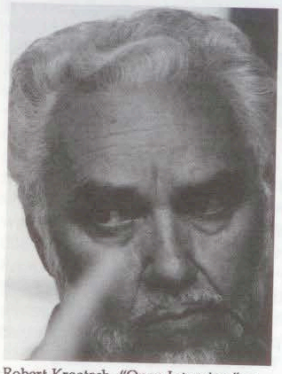
RM: When you started, then, there was a narrative. You had a sense of beginning and end, and there was some "stuff" going on in between.

RK: Yeah, but you know, another model that always excited me from my graduate student days was Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*—the way he kept changing the bloody thing. I thought, that is the way to write a poem. How many—nine versions in his life? I forget what it is—is that what it is? Somebody here fresh out of a course in American literature? But the fact that he could write *Leaves of Grass* . . . you know, if you read that first 1855 edition—have you ever looked at it? That kind of pristine poem that he had in a very beautiful way—and he says, "ah, but I have to interleave." That's fun, that sense that you interleave as well as add. And he could do that, and then say, "no, that's not right," so he makes it bigger and it gets fatter and more obscene and out of control as he goes. And that is really something that speaks to me. Just as I love that last section of *Paterson* found on Williams' desk. He must have planted it there when he knew he was dying so they could find that wonderful story of the old Irishwoman, drunk and telling stories—you know damn well that was no accident. He left that for somebody to find. I like all those unfinished poems in our history. I'm glad that Spenser didn't finish his poem, and I'm kind of excited that there were supposed to be all those other books in there. Or even, of course, Chaucer must have known he couldn't possibly have—what is it, 29 people each tell four stories or whatever?—he'd be writing forever. He almost built into his system a way of not being able to finish it. That's what excites me: the very unfinishability. Maybe it's simply a way of warding off death, who knows. Now I'm starting to be more honest, I guess.

RM: Now you're starting to work, eh?

RK: Yeah, that's right. That really moved me immensely, that thing about *Leaves of Grass*.

George Bowering: I'd like to hear the story about how *The Ledger* and *Seed Catalogue* got published in the peculiar places they got published in. How come those first two poems appeared in London, Ontario and Winnipeg?



Robert Kroetsch, "Open Interview" at Simon Fraser University, 10 July 1986. Photo by George Bowering

RK: Those Applegarth Follies people were influenced by James Reaney, who had this great sense of "local." And when they found out that the poem I was writing was really taking place very near there, that was their reason for being so excited; it was a poem coming out of that particular place.

GB: So in a sense the eastern poem gets published in the east and the western half—what you talk about as being the western half—gets published in the west.

RK: I was writer-in-residence at the University of Manitoba, or I was going to be, I guess. I had decided to go back to Binghamton for a summer. I had a meeting arranged, shall we say: I was involved with a woman; I was going to go spend the summer with her. So I didn't take the notes for the poem with me; I left them all in Winnipeg. I got there and realized I couldn't leave the poem alone; I had to work without the notes—I had an enormous pile of notes by this time. And by being free of the notes—it's again a very interesting lesson—suddenly I could write the poem because I didn't have all that material sitting on my desk. I went back with a manuscript, then used the notes I had. That's when Turnstone asked to publish it.

RM: Were you using the term "Field Notes" when *Seed Catalogue* was published?

RK: No, that's another story I thought I had suppressed. I was really thinking of "Field Notes" as the title of a novel—which turned out to be *Badlands* [1975; General, 1982]. So there I had this good title left over, Roy! No, I was fascinated by the idea of field notes, I suppose. Again, of all the long poems by Stevens, the one I like best is "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction." I mean, that seems to state it in a nutshell—"*Notes* Toward a Supreme Fiction"—the impossibility of that Supreme Fiction, and yet the necessity to make the notes toward it. And that again explains why I like the

incomplete, or uncompletable, poem. Because all you can do is make notes toward a supreme fiction, it seems to me. Like my good friend Gladys Hindmarch, making her endless notes toward an ultimate book of short stories, her "Boat Stories."

GB: She reminds me of *Leaves of Grass*.

RK: That's right. I get mad at her every time I see her but secretly I'm on the side of the manuscript, hoping it will resist her forever.

RM: Can you take us beyond *Seed Catalogue*, then? Because after that there's the poem "How I Joined the Seal Herd," which is the end of "Seed Catalogue."

RK: Okay, I remember that one because I went up to Prince Edward Island to do research for *The Studhorse Man*, because I was using Acadian material. One night I was lying there in bed and heard this strange sound, and it turned out to be a herd of seals. I went and investigated, and actually joined the seal herd briefly . . . no, I was tempted to . . . tempted. So, in the middle of the novel this poem insisted on being written. It was out of that experience. See, it's funny how there was the notion of deconstruction: those seals, my joining the seal herd, abandoning definitions of "self" and entering into that seal world—which was very philosophically accurate, as far as I was concerned.

RM: So that takes you almost immediately forward to *The Sad Phoenician* [Coach House, 1979] where an incredible voice emerges. Is it frenzy—or is that poem a release? Or a relief?

RK: I remember writing it; I remember the room I was sitting in. There was a big tree outside with a lot of leaves on it. And of course, for a prairie boy it's quite remarkable to see a tree with a lot of leaves on it. It was in Binghamton; I was house-sitting for somebody. The ground for that one? I think at that point I was pretty much at the stage where I was into the non-referentiality of language: something from which I have since retreated, also. But that's why I tried to find those grammatical possibilities that would generate—I tried "if/or" and all those things, but "and/but" was the one that really spoke to me: the "and" as an addition; the "but" as a taking away. I hear there's a new essay by Gass, in his new book, on "and". . . supposed to be a terrific essay. You know, this wonderful sense of what "and" could do was just wild; and again

that kind of generative thing. Then I was consciously looking for stuff, in a sense, for the bigger poem.

RM: In the sequel after that, "The Silent Poet Sequence," there's almost a very conscious kind of deconstruction of a particular definition of "poet." It seems that maybe it's the *failed* Modernist poet that we see.

RK: That's right on. One of the poems I taught in the long poem course was *Four Quartets*. Eliot's reputation and my sense of revulsion at that poem were at their pinnacle those days—and it was 1964 when I offered the course. I was fresh enough out of graduate school to remember Emerson and his concept of the artist. How can you be a great democrat and an artist claiming a seer-sayer status at the same time? How do you put the two together? I was—and still am—a prairie democrat, with a simple and explicit notion that *all* people are equal. How then speak as a poet, given that stance?

GB: Parodically.

RK: Parodically! Exactly. Exactly. Exactly. And look at the example: George! the guy who does it that way.

GB: If you have to show off, then you have to pretend, "Aw, shucks, I'm not really showing off," and then that's more showing off, right?

RM: What are you saying, George?

GB: Well, all parody has self-parody dragging along in it because you say "Aw, you know, I'm not Homer, I'm just, like, it's not like I'm building a mountain, I'm just shaving this off to get it smooth again." Then you realize you're being really pushy when you're being parodic: that somehow or another you're elevating yourself, by being parodic. So you have to, then, take care of that business, too. It's really hard for a "prairie democrat."

RM: What's interesting though, continuing with the publication history—is that Bob published *The Sad Phoenician* with Coach House. The non-referentiality of its language . . . I think Coach House, at that time, was very much into that aspect of language, as well. So there's a history in the publication.

RK: I think though, to pick up the point George and I were making, is that to publish with the major publishers is, again, almost asserting a kind of "high seriousness," which one is uneasy about. You feel better publishing with a little press that's probably going to go broke before the book comes out. Then you feel, "Well, I was just, kind of, being a good democrat." That's right.

GB: That book is so sumptuous, such an object.

RK: Which one is, of course, secretly pleased at.

GB: But the question is: the book is designed to show something falling apart, and yet it's the nicest looking book yet.

RK: Yeah, well . . . I wrote that statement on the back of the book about language—how I liked the Phoenicians because they took away the sacred dimension of language which the Egyptians had been using. That's a slight misreading of the Egyptians, obviously. But I liked the whole business of the Phoenicians having to get a destination and a price on a parcel so they could ship it off in a hurry because they were basically commercial seamen; they were shipping stuff around. And they had to invent a language that you could use fast and that you could teach to any dummy. None of this priest stuff that you had to spend years learning. But they end up publishing a priestly book by me—the privileged class.

RM: That final sequence, "The Criminal Intensities of Love as Paradise," was published as a pamphlet?

RK: No—Ron Smith did a very elaborate expensive book of that: $35, with a blue cover. It's very nice, I recommend it heartily.

RM: The end of the first volume of *Field Notes* and we're now paying $35!

RK: But you skipped one section, "The Winnipeg Zoo." You see, there I wanted to write a huge zoo poem. I wanted to go to zoos all over the world. I went to the one in Sydney. [To Bowering:] I went there because you told me to go there.

GB: At the zoo in Sydney they've got two kangaroos.

RK: Kangaroos! I had to go there to see a kangaroo because I couldn't go back and tell people I hadn't seen a kangaroo. But I

wanted to go to all the great zoos. I mean, a zoo is a wonderful metaphor. I could never get a hold of it; I could never find the poem that was there. The poem that I wrote is . . . well, it's okay, but it's like the poem that's there instead of *the poem*. Do you know what I mean? Almost a Modernist kind of poem, in certain ways. There's a good zoo in Winnipeg, of course, which I used to frequent trying to understand what I was trying to get at. And again, I guess I would now see it in terms of Bakhtin's inversion of the world: the zoo as a kind of carnivalesque place; you've taken the whole world of nature and turned it into this bizarre kind of culture.

RM: Are we going to get a deconstruction of that poem?

RK: No, I've had fantasies, but I've failed again at having a second version of the zoo poem that had everything in it that I wanted to put in and didn't get in. But I can't do it. I've never done that and I've kind of lost interest in it.

GB: Frank Davey said that long poems nowadays—you don't finish them, you abandon them. And you talked about them failing. I'm wondering if there's a perceived difference between abandoning the poem and just pushing it until it fails?

RK: I think in failing you never quite abandon. I mean, it's just like me with my secret fantasy of finishing the zoo poem: someday suddenly a giraffe or something will give me the clue I'm looking for. But I do like the model of, say, Whitman or Spenser, where they never can finish it but they never cease longing to finish it. That's a beautiful thought: that's exactly right. That's great, eh?

RM: I'm going to just ask one more general question and then if anyone has questions, just pop in. I was going to try to get Bob to turn his narration of *Field Notes* around a bit and let us know where *Field Notes* starts to connect with other long poems in Canada. It's like seeking out kinships—the genre or the form is being defined at the very moment you're writing the thing.

RK: Okay, "Advice to My Friends"—the sequence of sonnets in *Advice to My Friends* [volume two of *Field Notes*]—was a kind of encoding in my own mind. And again, it failed very quickly; I couldn't sustain it at all. But I was announcing, in a curious way, the test points in my life. Partly I got that notion from John Berryman's *Dream Songs* (which I probably misremember)—there's a long sequence of those dream songs where he looks at his own generation.

I forget who they are. Curiously, the poets that I relate to are mostly a bit younger than I am. But I would say Bowering and bpNichol are the two poets that I have to confront most directly. And I'm glad they're there. And here. It's a sense of rapport with both those men—a very deep one, I would say. There's another group: Fred Wah has only more recently emerged as a poet of the long poem—or, at least we've only recognized that he, in fact, is writing long poems. Daphne Marlatt would be somebody else. I don't think she's every really got past the greatness of *Steveston*. She has never found a way around that—and that kind of "moment" when she's hit all the problems.

RM: Is there some way—I know this is a really difficult question—some way of essentializing the concern for the long poem in contemporary Canadian writing? What kind of desire is it fulfilling—or not fulfilling?

RK: What it allows us to do is to speak the incompleteness of our story. What characterizes our story is its very lack of unity. That's why Canada is—as I'm arguing these days—a postmodern country. When you look at American literature and American life, the great difference is the belief in the American dream. Every immigrant who sneaks across the Mexican border or flies in on an airplane is immediately caught up in that dream—whether by parody, or whatever. *The Great Gatsby* is the ultimate statement of it (it seems to me), the utter confidence in that dream. That dream is not operating in our psyches. We live with a fragmentation, and it's very hard to write a novel about that fragmentation. I'm not saying it can't be done, but the long poem, supremely, allows us to explore that condition. It goes into every aspect of our lives. It goes into the notion of a language. The notion of a "Canadian idiom" is a suspect concept; again, George has played on that. The notion of self is much less defined; again, our very open notion of self and all the wonderful posturing that goes on in our culture about a self, when you know it's all not quite what we mean. Then, there's the notion of what I might loosely call "collage," just putting the pieces there and letting the reader read—letting the reader solve the problem for you, almost.

* * *

Fred Wah: Numbers come and go in your poetry, those innate structures that you deal with. Now, if you were Ed Dyck, I'd know

where that comes from. But I was wondering how your number systems present themselves to you?

RK: Number systems . . . oh, that was another thing about *The Sad Phoenician*: I was playing with the alphabet there. The alphabet intrigues me by the utter rigidity and the utter meaninglessness of the system. You have to learn *that* order of the abc's or you'll get lost in a library, for instance. Or you can't find your name in a phone book. I like that kind of arbitrary system. And numbers are similar: that simple business of adding one, and adding one, and adding one. But then suddenly there appear the mysterious things we do with that very simple sequence. Like the doubling that I like so much. In Virgil's *Aeneid* he has three units do this, three do that, four do this, four do that, six do this, six do that: that wonderful, incredible sense of the mathematics of a poem. Using math as a way to think about a structure. And, of course, even stanza itself is really applied mathematics in a way, isn't it? Rhyme, or counting lines, or even counting stresses is very mathematical. So we've moved away from that mathematical model. As writers, most of us go to a speech model. But in fact, the math is moving in at a structural level for me, it seems.

RM: Can you veer that discussion over towards poetic form? I hear you also talking about poetic form, and poetic structure. You definitely use the page. *The Ledger* is the first poem in which you've opened up the space of the text—not only with the vertical columns of type, but by creating a horizontal pull on the page. That seems to me a very mathematical gesture. You've got the vertical, and so you establish the horizontal, and suddenly you've got an interplay of the two columns. That is continued in *Seed Catalogue*. The horizontal opens up a tremendous amount of space: the reading goes down, and then it also can go back and forth.

RK: I think we're moving into a particular kind of math which really does intrigue me. Geometry, in a sense. I would say I was intrigued by the kind of geometrical possibilities of quadrants, for one thing, the horizontal and the vertical as you suggest. These are elements of design. Also, I like mathematics as language.

RM: When you begin talking about design in poetic form, you are talking about somewhat arbitrary systems. The organic metaphor is abandoned—there's nothing "organic" about horizontal and vertical. It's something that's decidedly, outwardly abstract. What I want to do is clarify the notion of process poetry. Often in

Canadian criticism you hear people saying, "Bob Kroetsch is a process poet," and "George Bowering is a process poet." I know you talk about process, but you read *Seed Catalogue* and there's something anti-process about the whole thing, too. The design elements are not elements of process.

RK: Yes, not at all. I like composing a page in the sense of "weight" on a page, the way you put the weight—like a small statement and a big statement, and the small statement daring to be as heavy as the big one. I like that sense of positioning "clumps" of word-thoughts on the page. And that is anything but process. I quite agree with your questioning "process"—I think he's right, George, that we've overused the word "process" beyond belief.

GB: I'm quite willing to let it go. What I've hated for 20 years is when somebody says that I espouse organic form. I've always hated that, because people take "organic" to mean anything that's not mechanical. I'm way more interested in mechanical. I'm much more interested in the "random," or chance, than I am in the "processual," I think.

RM: But within the random or chance structure there is an element of process—I mean, moving from one point to another point to another point in time. Are you saying your writing doesn't exist in that kind of time?

GB: I guess you'd have to write an essay about what "process" means to you, as opposed to what it means to somebody else. But when the word "process" came up in discussing poetry it was usually opposed to "product." And it's sensible if you keep it at that level, i.e. poetry in which the readerly act is a kind of slavish following of an already worked out 24-line poem that leads you to a certain thought, or an attitude towards nature, or something like that. That would be a product. And product poetry, it seems to me, is what the New Criticism was interested in: a poem in which everything you can possibly find out about that poem is already there. So if there was any failure at understanding the poem, it wasn't that the poem didn't embrace that thing that you didn't find; it was that you didn't find the way into it. And to me, the notion of "process poetry," for the reader, is that it's not necessarily inherent in the poem. Or needn't be understood as inherent in the poem, unless somebody with a completely different matrix of experiences comes to the poem and finds it in the work. "Process" makes a lot more sense to me, curiously, as something to attach to

the reading of the poem than to the writing of the poem itself. So the idea of a "process poet" doesn't make sense to me. "Process poem," maybe.

RK: I think a more useful word, in terms of the long poem, is the notion of "middles." That we want to stay in the middles. It's a resistance to endings, which is a pretty serious act given the kind of culture we live in—which is obsessed with endings. I mean, they're always trying to "solve" a problem, or get to a "conclusion." Or, you know, you've had the experience at the end of the class: "Okay, what do you really mean, professor? Which one of these are we supposed to believe, now?" It's the sense that they really want a conclusion. The long poem insists upon staying in middles.

FW: Well, so much of the long poem is generative, and the poet usually is seeking the generative possibility: something that will keep me going; something that will keep the gas tank full.

GB: An old-fashioned product poem was as big as it needed to be: you couldn't add anything to it. And there's a sense in which the poems we're writing now could be way bigger; there could be way more to them, if we wanted, and it wouldn't ruin the poem.

Juliet McLaren: Bob, that happened to you, because you thought you were finished *Field Notes*. And then you turned out not to be.

RK: Yeah, that's right. Or even, again, when we were hung up on a certain kind of lyric—you know, the last two lines, that were so critical; where you snapped it shut—that notion of having sacrificed the poem to get to that ending. Somehow I'd rather sacrifice the end to get to the poem, sort of.

GB: The blood of the poem on your hands . . .

RK: Yeah! That's right! You felt "Ouch!" You're trying to load the mousetrap and get your hand . . .

An Epilogue: Of Sorts

In the car, on the way to the airport . . .

RM: Taping in the car is okay, but I can't think as fast as I'm driving. I don't want to crash.

RK: That's right, it's a verbal route.

RM: Still, I want to pick up on that narrative that we had going in the car. You left home for grade 12, then graduated and went to the University of Alberta, majoring in English. That was in—

RK: 1944-45. I finished grade 12 in Red Deer High School.

RM: The last year of the war.

RK: Yes, that's right. I was a student at Red Deer High School when the war ended. In fact, I remember our celebration on D-Day. Then I went to university in the fall of 1945. Of course, there were no courses in modern literature those days, so over the course of the next three years I studied 19th romanticism, that sort of thing. In the summer of 1946—I took naval training the first year at university—I went out to Esquimalt and sailed on a frigate up to Alaska. Then in the summer of '47 I went to the Banff School of Fine Arts and I took a creative writing course there. Hugh MacLennan came out to give a lecture that summer and that was an interesting experience for me—a very important experience in a way—to see a live Canadian writer and to hear him . . . I got onto a train to say goodbye to a beautiful English girl who'd lived in Canada through the war and while we were saying goodbye to each other MacLennan got onto the train and sat down and spoke a few words to us. We felt that God had sat down and given us a few words of consolation.

RM: That goes right back to your beginnings.

RK: Yes, it sure does.

RM: At that time one could almost say that Canadian literature was still a future proposition.

RK: Yes, certainly in terms of any kind of teaching, good grief it was almost like a personal discovery you made. A guy like Hugh MacLennan—he loomed very large as somebody who was saying, "We have our story that we're going to tell."

RM: I think I read in some interview with you that you went up north because you were somehow intimidated by other writers. I didn't understand that.

RK: No, no. I went up north with a very strong sense that—I guess it was the Hemingway model, you know, going out and getting experience . . . but I also had the feeling then that the north did contain a story. Which I still have in a certain way. And I went up north with the intention of getting some kind of experience. Of course, I didn't recognize at that time that I had already lived a lot of experiences that I could use. I think a young writer nowadays wouldn't make that mistake—but I did.

RM: How many years were you up north?

RK: I was up north for a long time. I spent a total of six years in various parts of the north—in the Mackenzie area, then to Fort Churchill briefly, then to Goose Bay, Labrador.

RM: You worked for the U.S.—

RK: Air force, the information and education person. That's when I decided that if I was really going to get serious about writing I had to go to graduate school and learn more about literature. And—1954—that summer I went to Vermont to study. That's where my return to the university began. It's still in progress.

RM: What was your feeling about being in the U.S. at the time?

RK: Oh, I liked it there. Vermont in the summer is a very idyllic place, and there were lots of students who were interested in writing. And I had lived in a very great, intense kind of isolation from other writers. There was much less of a structure for letting you meet writers those days, especially in Canada.

RM: So your view of writing at that time was fairly straightforward. There was no nationalist basis, no regionalist basis, none of those intentions?

RK: No, no—I hadn't learned all that stuff. I just wanted to write. I was very Canadian.

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RM: Can you comment on any changes that occurred as you were going through your poem at the day-long reading?

RK: Well, I suppose the most dramatic thing for me was realizing how *Excerpts from the Real World* is part of the ongoing poem. I'd had doubts about that, serious doubts, and now I see there is a connection, even though there is a radical shift in the nature of the "I" or the narrator.

RM: It's almost as if the writing is declaring certain kinds of contents that you may not be conscious of, and as you read the text, you yourself see it and your reading of it necessarily becomes part of your thinking of the poem. That's a very complex way of thinking of a literary work. If it remains open, in that sense, then your whole relationship to it is always open to chance.

RK: I like that notion of chance. There is a play between design and chance, and maybe a certain kind of design makes chance possible. I think there's a way in which you can make chance happen . . .

RM: I see: a design in which chance can occur.

RK: It's a kind of pressure between design and whatever it is that resists or opens design.

RM: So, in this way, the design can be a part of your conscious thinking of art, of poetry, of literature, in your compositional method.

RK: That's right, and, you see, one of the things that you have to let speak in this kind of poem, is occasion. Because occasion is one of the places where chance can assert itself. One of the things that I've found in writing about travel is the notion of travel as a place where chance can really speak itself. I don't really think of myself as writing travel poems; it's just that in the process of travel, which is so much a part of our lives nowadays, chance can really assert itself again.

RM: I notice an incredible restlessness, not only in your writing but in your actual living. Some writers have restlessness in their writing and then you find out they never actually move around. But you, physically, are making these moves all the time. Some people might even ask, "How can he write, if he's moving around so much?"

RK: I live a fairly isolated life in Winnipeg. I really do withdraw from the social world.

RM: You do have quite intense moments of silence?

RK: Oh, yeah! Or days and days! Smaro is very tolerant of that. I think it's more natural to me than it is to her. My life alternates between the kind of frantic travelling I do, and pretty long periods of silence. Like, I go to Scotland, then I come back and for a month I don't go anywhere. Then I go with my daughter for a very nice visit out to Alberta, and then I go home and just disappear again for a month.

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RM: We were going through *Field Notes*, but for some reason we never talked about "Sketches of a Lemon." It seems to me that there is this moment in the long poem—if I may use this term—a sacred moment when this tenuous sequence develops, like the shape of a lemon—it's that crafted—which is very much within the whole. The images become minimal and you focus on a delicate fruit which in another way is also really tough. In your mind how does that sequence work in relation to the whole?

RK: The notion of "sketches" is like "field notes," it's trying to say what can't quite be said. But I think the domestic is one of the things that I posit against all that travel stuff, for one thing. I like kitchens, and all the things that go on in a kitchen. At-homeness.

RM: In the larger frame of the poem, the at-homeness is something that is *new* in *Field Notes*. There's a lot of things about home, *home* in memory, and the longest sequence preceding this, *The Sad Phoenician*, is a very restless poem with a lot of chaos, confusion and destruction. Here we find a delicate balance between presence and absence.

RK: It's interesting. I was writing *The Sad Phoenician* when I met Smaro. When we first started living together we got a house together, and I suppose "Sketches of a Lemon" is a response to the kind of domesticity that our relationship offered.

RM: Was that also related to a regrounding in Winnipeg?

RK: Well, the process of my coming back to Canada was a very slow one. First I came back as a writer-in-residence for one year; then I stayed another year; then I went back to the States for a year; then I moved to Canada. It's hard to say when I really understood that I had done it. My movement had been *outward* a lot before that. Maybe "Sketches of a Lemon" is that bridge—that turning or *one* of the turnings back toward home. Well, I mean, not back, I don't think you can ever go back to . . .

RM: No, it's not sentimental.

RK: No, not at all.

RM: It's to recover the immediacy of one's own thinking, one's own consciousness, within the private space. The poems in *Field Notes* up to that point didn't propose private space?

RK: Even the "Seal Herd" poem is about *leaving*. When the guy looks in the mirror he realizes the woman is telling him to hit the road.

RM: So then you've got this sequence where the private gets its own space, and you start talking about finality.

RK: Actually you're making me understand again what I have to do next. Holy mackerel—that's interesting.

RM: I don't know how we missed this sequence in the S.F.U. interview. I think in the public discussion we just lost sight of it. The final sequence, "The Criminal Intensities of Love as Paradise": in the light of what you've just said, there travel and domesticity seem to come together. When you wrote it, were you conscious of it being a conclusion to the volume?

RK: I felt I had found a way of concluding a volume without coming to a forbidding closure. The criminal; paradise. Breaking and

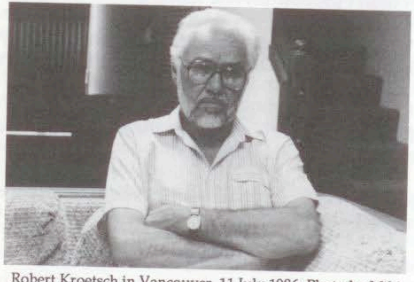
joining. Going up into the mountains—that too suggests a traditional ending that will become both a focus and an opening out.

RM: The line gets narrow on the page and the grammatical and syntactic conventions are violated completely. So you are a writer in paradise, in the density of language.

RK: I like that. Also, as I recall, there are no pronouns in the poem. I felt that by resisting pronouns I could move toward the paradisal. In a poem that explores the concept of "I" the concluding section translates . . .

RM: And music is the result.

RK: Not so literally as in Zukofsky's "*A*". That's another matter. There is, somewhere in "Criminal Intensities," a line that is a quotation from Zukofsky. The kind of plagiarism that honours the donor. Zukofsky and H.D.—they test and stir me, these days, the way Pound and Stevens did in the past. Zukofsky is like Williams—he keeps getting away on you, he keeps leading you deeper into the forest. Zukofsky's "*A*", tempting us with the letter B. But Bob beware . . .



Robert Kroetsch in Vancouver, 11 July 1986. Photo by Miki

"Mettre en Conte le Dream"

If dreams are explorations of the round world which surrounds and transcends the flat world of explanation, then any theory about the nature of dreaming is excluded by definition. How many nightmares are the result of Freud's misdirected researches I'd hate to say. Even the statement I've just made is semanticidal paradox. And since to tell a dream is to convert it from a dreamed to a story-teller's experience, I've no choice but to present it to you in fabliau-form, as if it were a conte by Jacques Ferron, or one of Sheila's or Fred Flahiff's or Jack Shadbolt's anecdotes. If you think I'm unaware how difficult that is to do, let me remind you that my Ph.D. thesis was about Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and the anecdotal tradition, reaching from Plutarch via Bacon and Shakespeare down to Aubrey's *Brief Lives*. I know one cannot experience another person's dreams; and I admit I am the last person who ought to be encouraged to tell his dreams.

I dreamed this particular dream on the night of September 30th, that is on early Saturday morning, October 1st, 1988. On Tuesday or Monday of this week, Sheila called me, about 10:00 p.m., to see a full or nearly full moon rising over Georgia Strait. The sky was very clear, and the lagoon as flat as glass. Reflected in the lagoon was a second moon, as bright as the one hanging above it. For one, two, three nights after that, we saw the same unchanged full moon, and the same reflection in the same mirror of plate-glass water. The lagoon is an unparalleled master of graphic design, framed by the spit, the south rock, the hump lying east and west, and the north rock, but because of its tidal nature, being sometimes full of sea-water, and sometimes dry sea-bed, it is never or rarely guilty of repeating itself. We look out over the lagoon at a sea, the Strait of Georgia, which even with its covering of blue sky or cloud or shelves of fog or marine traffic, jibbing or tacking yachts, fishing boats, tugs with sawdust barges, tugs with rafts of logs, friendly American battleships or less charismatic nuclear submarines, is, from day to day, pretty much the same. The lagoon never is. It never paints two canvases the same. But this week it did, in

cahoots with les détroits de Georgia. Perhaps it had achieved absolute beauty of design. I wanted to ask my friend Jorge this question, and have him fly out here to put him on the spot, and see what Sheila and I had seen. I didn't absolutely decide not to ask Jorge my question, but I did toy with asking another, related but less difficult question, what rule of design, since he was a graphic designer, could be drawn from a moon reflection in the lagoon's tidal mirror and its generating body in the sky, with respect to scale and symmetry? By Saturday night, this question had become irrelevant. Earlier, we had gone out for a brief walk on the spit, and as we approached the halfway mark, we began to hear music. I heard it first, and at first I wasn't sure whether I was hearing it or just imagining I was. As we came to the south rock at the end of the spit the music we were hearing became distinct enough to be recognized as bag-pipe music. Look, said Sheila, and pointed to a dark figure in the shadow of the oak trees in the shoulders of the rock above us. Of course, I said. The drone of his pipes made his figure seem more ghostly than human. Isn't this Piper's Lagoon, I said, and isn't it named after the ghostly piper who always comes to warn of threatening dangers to those living on the lagoon? We crept around the base of the south rock, and put it between us and the lagoon. The piper's primitive counterpoint of pedal point and melody followed us, drifting above us. Across Georgia Strait, we could see the Nanaimo ferry pushing past the Snake Island light down the low coast-line of Gabriola Island. Credit it with arriving on schedule at the Departure Bay dock at 7:35 p.m., and the time was about seven o'clock. We smoked a cigarette on a log a few feet from the sea's edge, and listened to the piper's tentative mourning. It was dark when we got home. When we looked for a double moon to rise for Jorge Frascara, the lagoon refused the request. What did rise instead was an almost perfect half-moon. We could guess why. It wasn't because the tide had run out, it must have been because the wind had ruffled the reflecting surface of the lagoon's mirror of water. What was mysterious was, why had this half-moon followed so quickly and so precisely after the double full moons we had been observing?

It must have been quite late on the morning of October 1st that I dreamed this particular dream, because when I woke up, it was just before dawn. I dreamed I had gone out scootering with Tsade in the northern wilderness. Jorge was going to make us a roaring fire, to revive us when we got back, and Sheila was going to bake him an upside-down pineapple cake. The scooter has always been my favorite means of travelling. The two scooters I had preserved from my boyhood were of a very primitive, but nevertheless very

effective kind. They consisted of a flat board, with a steering wheel at one end, and a fixed wheel at the other end. To operate them, you grasped the handle-bars with both hands, set one foot on the foot-board, and kicked away with the other foot. Scherazade had never operated a scooter before, so I assigned the older slower scooter to her, partly to offset her youthful impetuousness, partly to give my experience and age some authority with respect to hazards never absent from this kind of scootering. But she picked up the essentials of the scooter very quickly and was soon racing ahead of me, and my faster scooter. We were quite a strange pair, she a shameless feminist, and I an elderly, shamefaced male-chauvinist! It was mad of me to think I could compete with her. The oneiros-terrain into which we were entering, the northern wilderness, soon put this rivalry aside. Scootering is like kayaking, it focuses one's attention on the compulsive nearness of the world through which one is travelling. We forgot the mechanics of our scooters in our perception of the immaculate loneliness of the northern wilderness: its face like the face of god composed in a peace so absolute it was frightening. For Robin Mathews, his countrymen, that's us, go to the wilderness to kneel down before and become one with its mysterium tremens, the source of their identity, the centre of their preternatural being. Truth is of God, and passes human wit, Yeats said or almost said. I thought of this, my favorite of all misquotations, as we stood there beside our scooters.

It was at this moment, this utterly lonely moment of truth, that we saw our first wolf. Tsade saw it first. Look, she said, or rather cried out in a stage whisper. It has a bird in its mouth, she said. I looked and saw it was followed by another wolf. It has another wolf with it, I said. It was smiling. It's smiling at us, I said. I don't think it's smiling at us, Tsade said. No, I whispered back, I don't think it's seen us. Canines don't have remarkable eyes, Tsade informed me. I know dogs don't, I whispered back. It's the female wolf that has the bird in its mouth, Tsade smiled at me. Poor bird, I said, turning my eyes back from the faintly smiling Tsade to the two wolves and their prey, and my scooter around in the direction of our retreat. I feel like a voyeurist, I said. Aren't they small, Tsade said. That's because the wilderness-keyhole through which we are looking at them is so vast, I reasoned. Our senses are not rational; they dream up our experiences, don't they now, I said. Strict measure, I pontificated with my hands on my chin and my elbows on the handle-bars of my scooter, has nothing to do with what we see, hear, taste, smell or touch, has it now? This is why Freud is so wrong. He tries to rationalize our dreams, so that he can cry out against the mind's arithmetic, which is the only thing we have

which really counts in our struggle against the totalitarianism of despair expressed so sublimely by Shakespeare: we are such stuff as dreams are made on, etc. etcetera. But dreams count, don't they, countered Tsade, resorting to a Derridan pun. Not really, not for Freud they don't, since he has left himself nothing to count with, I contradicted her, raising my head from my hands and my elbows from my machine, and smiling at her like the female wolf a few scooters' lengths away from us, with the bird in its mouth. Sssh, Tsade whispered, crouching down over her vehicle. I crouched over mine. But the warning came too late. It was then that the wolves saw us. It was the she-wolf who saw us first. What she saw of us startled her. She dropped the bird from her mouth. She snouted our scent with a quick nose. She looked round at the youngling at her dugs, to see if it was paying attention. It was. She repeated her instructions with the conscious gesture of a dancing master with an apprentice in tow. What she said to her pupil could be summed up in a single word, the adverb, *now*. We could read it, too.

Let's go, said Tsade. Yes, let's go, I said almost simultaneously. Where to, she asked. When I hesitated, she took the lead, and tore round and past me with a magnificent kick-start which took her from where she was to where she wasn't. Across that water there, to that bluff, she yelled at me. I tore after her in the direction she had chosen. In a moment we were safe, but only for a moment. At the very instant, having caught our breath, we searched for an escape route—we had our second wolf-sighting. On our left flank, we saw three wolves. All three were smiling, and all three were smiling at us. It almost seemed as if they were acting in concert with the two wolves of our first sighting. We must be in wolf valley, Tsade said. We'll have to climb up out of it. She led the only way we could see of possible escape from the unpleasant dinner engagement the wolves seemed to have in mind for us. Yet for all the danger we were in, I could see she relished the fact that we had exchanged roles; she had become the protector of a male who would have insisted on, as a member of the dominant sex, being her protector. This temporary postponement of disaster didn't mean we were out of danger. All we could do was catch our breath without any time to discuss together strategies of escape. Almost immediately, came our third wolf sighting, and then a fourth, and then a fifth; the third of four wolves, the fourth of five wolves, and the fifth, of from five to seven wolves. We seemed doomed, surrounded. I will stay here and talk sense to them, Tsade said to me. Why? I asked. There's no time for argument, she said. I'm a lot younger than you and more tasty, and they will let you escape while they are relishing me. So get going. I made no move to move. You simply don't know your

predators, I told her. All predators, except man, practice their predation on the weak, sick, accident-prone members of the species they feed on. So I will talk sense to our friends; they will accept me as normal food; and you must get away. I didn't think my argument would work, but it left her suggestion exposed as unacceptable. If we were going to have to talk sense to the wolves, we would do it together.

I admit I was, at this point, at my wit's end. As I recall things recollectively, I don't think Tsade was. Sometimes I thought I matched her in intellectual arete. But if I did, and I'm not sure that I did even in the realm of theoria, in the realm of praxis she wore her arete with a woman's confidence in the seagull-like adequacy of her avoirdupois, falling, rising, poised. Her bone was not as heavy as a male's, but she made much more skilful use of its weight. It was a beautiful thing to behold, when these, her arete and her woman's inwit, her consciousness of being of the superior sex, failed her. At this moment, the climax of my dream, she wasn't angry, but pleased with herself. I don't think she was quite at her wit's end. I think she may have suspected that I was. Thus: she looked at her watch—I too consulted mine, but only to keep attention focussed on the same ideas she had with respect to our predicament, so that we could act out our fate in unison, or at least with or in contrapuntal harmony. What I think she had in mind, was to set up a time-clock of how many minutes or rather seconds we had left together before fate wolfed us down. I took heart from her not being in an obviously prayerful mood. When it came to that, I knew what her prayer, and through her, what mine would be: oh, oh, oh, O sweet dear god, the country, yes, so beautiful it almost converts me back to theocentrism—as an honest-to-god atheist, help me to outwit it, and its magnificent she-wolves and their handsome yuppy-puppy males, and you! It should be obvious to the Freudian investigators of this dream, or rather the story based upon it, that I am not an honest-to-god anything. I admit I was embarrassed at being confronted by a deus absconditus who said to me something like the following (while Tsade stood beside me seemingly dumb-founded): I am not the three persons of Christian theology. I am not the mechanical accident of scientific speculation. I am not a vast but dissipating energy. I am not the arbitrary culpability of things. Neither am I the beautiful landspaces of Norman Yates. I am not the sun, moon, or star-spangled banner of outer space explorations. I am not the black hole of Nietzsche nor the differences with a difference of the Saussurean Jacques Derrida's in-the-beginning-was-the-word. I am the metaphysical ferment of meanings out of which languages grow. Do

you understand me, the apparition of the deus absconditus asked me. Yes, I replied, no, I said, I am beginning to misunderstand you, I'm afraid. The face of the apparition had no resemblance to the face on the shroud of Turin. The face I was looking at was rather like that of a stage actor than that of a TV screen. It darkened itself. Have no fear—don't think you have to fall down and worship. You will come to no harm. I have chosen to save you from the jaws of the wolves, said the apparition. I want you to explain me to your people. But am I the best choice, I asked. Wouldn't someone like Margaret Atwood reach a wider audience, I asked. I've thought of her, the apparition said. She's strong on self-promotion, it said. This prevents her from seeing things the way I do. She's not what I had in mind, to do the sort of thing I have in mind. The apparition turned as if about to make an exit. Look, said Tsade, the wolves are almost on us. It doesn't matter whether they eat you or not, said the apparition, exiting. But they won't, the apparition called back, turning, and was gone.*

At this point, we threw our arms in the air, as if we were skaters in a hockey game which had gone into overtime and our goal had broken the tie with a sudden death decision giving us both the game and the series. We are saved, I cried. It didn't seem to matter much to the surrounding wolves. God, said Tsade, helps those who help themselves. I could see she was trembling. The wolves were almost about to pounce. We are saved, I said. What did you see, I asked her. I don't know what I saw, she said. God, she repeated helps those who help themselves. She smiled. I saw, she said, I don't know what I saw. What did you see? I saw an Egyptian god with the head of a bird, she jested. What did you see, she asked back at me. I don't know what I saw, I replied. I saw a

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* I realize that this part of my dream will pose enormous difficulties for some of my readers, especially for those who are agnostics, not atheists like David Hume, the enlightenment philosopher more celebrated in his own day for his atheism than for his rejection of Cartesian mechanism. If he didn't accept mechanical causation, how could he accept a clock-maker god? The atheism of David Hume doesn't surprise me so much as his misunderstanding of Rousseau's alienation. When he was at the point of death, David Hume was visited by James Boswell, who wanted to find out if the dying atheist had repented and changed his mind. Boswell was a stupendous clever fool, but his folly is, like Rousseau's paranoia, more forgivable than Hume's sanity. We do not know what Hume experienced in the last minutes of his crucifixion by cancer. He could only share these with Boswell (and his public) in a fiction as insecure as what I am now attempting.

Japanese goddess, with the face of Rose of Lima. Santa Rosa de Lima, Tsade said to me in a quick burst of verbal machine-gun fire, is Fred Flahiff's saint, the saint you don't dare to invoke lest she overwhelm you with assistance. We must go, she added. What did you see, I persisted. I wanted to be very sure what I'd seen, I told her. I remember what I heard, Tsade said. I don't remember what I saw. I saw so many gods and goddesses I don't recall whether they were Inuit or Chinese or Aztec or Greek or Himalayan or Hittite or Haitian or Celtic or—I don't remember, I'm not sure—but—no, we must go. Neverless we must, I said, agree on what we saw, otherwise how can we be sure we are saved? We must go, she said. We can at least agree they all had the crucified face of the archetypal mother, can't we, I insisted. I don't remember, she said—perhaps not wanting me to know what she remembered. Do you remember what you saw, she asked me. No, I'm trying to, I said. I remember clearly that I saw something, but not precisely what it was I saw. I remember precisely, she admitted, one of the faces—it was a beautiful male face, like, like— She readied her scooter. The wolves had sent an avant-garde to block our retreat. She pointed her machine directly at them. They re-acted with the fierce caution of an armed riot squad picking up unarmed protesters. What's the good, I asked, of being saved, if we don't remember not only what we were saved from but who saved us? What's the good, she said, of remembering anything, if we're not saved and are eaten alive? With a frantic kick of her left foot, she and her machine were off. I was as startled by this Amazonian kick-off, as the wolves. I followed her, as if I was a child being dragged from in front of a car by a frantic mother. Being saved didn't matter to me anymore. A new despair possessed me, that when the dream vanishes—and I knew now I was dreaming—and we try to dream it again, we never arrive at the dream we want to recall, it is another dream we arrive at, and from that, another, until we have to be satisfied with the insecure fiction of a series of fictions. But I followed her. She had blasted a way through the party of wolves. They let me pass unmolested. They were no longer a police riot squad. They smiled at me, as if they were glad we had got away from them, confident that they would eventually get us; they were hunters, good sports, glad of a quarry who challenged the odds so heavily in favour of their supper later on, after a gratifyingly hard-earned chase. I didn't acknowledge their sportsmanship as I hurtled past them, to skid to a stop on a ledge Tsade had reached, at reckless speed, moments ahead of me. We stepped off our scooters and let them complete the hockey-players' game-hug of unexpected victory. They fell around each other, as if inedible though they

were, they shared our danger of being devoured by the wolves. We leaned back against the Yates-like cliffs they had brought us to, said nothing, stared at each other. You won't believe this, she said to me. I always wanted to have a genuine mystical experience, she confessed. In my wildest dreams, she said, picking her way like a young doe carrying its first fawn, very near term, across a stretch of sea beach, at low tide, with elegance, caution, precision, counter-pointing breath and footing—in my most wild dreams, she said, I never hoped, expected or dreamed of anything like this. I imagined a mystical experience to be like that of Bernini's Teresa or Yeats' Leda, swooning backwards in ecstacy or ravished by an unspeakably divine sadism, one to one, the feather-duster topping the table-top. I never foresaw being equated to every god and goddess the human mind is or has been haunted by, in so brief a nunc stans. Derrida, she began, and stopped short. Yes, I prompted, what about Derrida, I prodded. Derrida's polytheistic-atheism, she said, unravels both god and man. And woman, I said. I would have gone on asking about Derrida. We both of us sensed we were still in the suburbs of a nunc stans, a standing now, which we had entered, not like the medieval monk, via the singing of a nightingale, but via the smiling teeth of the wolves. We had reversed roles, not as procreationists, hipsters of an angel-headed chemical bondage, but as voyeurs of the round world, which the cartographers of the flat world can never know, yet know as its summum bonum: what ordinary folk call truth. I wanted to articulate, her role. She wanted to riddle out the paradoxes, my role. I felt the ledge against which we leaned grow heavy. I turned my eyes to the narrow horizon at the foot of our ledge. Above, the sky was a bowl of milky light. Look, I said. It was then that we had our first sighting of bears. There were two of them, a fairly young mother and its year-old daughter. They bounced along like women tourists, having a good time with each other, amused at their own truculence, aware that they were being cheated by the natives, safe in their magnificent fur coats, bumping into everything in their way, jolly about their melancholy weight. Bears never seem to belong, they always seem like foreigners. Almost simultaneously came our second sighting, and then our third. They didn't see us. They saw the wolves, and they also saw that the wolves were having some sort of do, party, celebration. The wolves made it plain they weren't invited. Very well, they would come as uninvited guests. The wolves didn't like this at all, in fact, had been observing preliminary courtesies, before proceeding ceremoniously, they were not gentlefolk, but neither were they gluttons, to the banquet. What the partying wolves tried to do, was

to head the uninvited guests the bears off from our presence. It was then that the bears caught sight of us. Lions roar. Wolves howl. Eagles scream, cougars and human babies. Bears utter a deep rumbling basso-profundo grumble, as if grumbling and laughing an ill-natured laughter at having to grumble. As uninvited guests often are, they were in a good humour, these bears almost upon us. They didn't bellow in unison, but all at once and every-one separately. It hit my ears like a shipload of aggressive tourists: this ursine resentment of inhospitality, a laughing it off, yes—yet still very close to tears and human misery. The wolves moved round their uninvited guests and threw around them an entanglement of howling with skilful ventriloquism. What now seems comic in the fictional space of a conte in the real space of my dream seemed catastrophic. What possible remission could there be now, to the peril we faced? The wolves were minueting around the bears. The bears were dancing a la volta around the wolves. It was startling to behold the heights to which they could leap up such masses of bone, muscle and fur. But at any moment one of these beasts might decide to break ranks and turn attention to us, and we would be lost. Our only escape route was up the cliff behind us. We would have to drag each other up it. Our faithful scooters had carried us to where we were. Now we would have to drag them after us. Tsade read my thoughts. What about them, she asked me. We'll need them later on, I told her. Later on, she asked. Her voice was matter-of-fact. The passionate fear which had energised her arete had left her. I let my eyes scan her face. It was like the face of the moon when it seems to be listening to a private music. I shut my eyes, using my eyelids to exclude the message I didn't want: peace. God, I said, repeating her earlier injunction, helps those who help themselves. Then I seized her and dragged her, notch by notch, to the level above us. When that was reached, I repeated the procedure. As soon as the process was underway, Tsade seemed to reverse herself, and follow my lead. When I was exhausted with dragging her up the cliff-face, she would drag me. Using both our strengths alternately, we reached safety. I had to go back for first one scooter, then the other. Down below, the party of the wolves and the bears had become noisy and violent.

When I reached the summit with the scooters, there were three things to be done, preparatory to our safe return. First, to oil our machines, next to division up our emergency rations; and finally, to consult our maps. Each scooter had its own saddle-bag, attached, since the scooter doesn't have a saddle, to the steering-post. When we checked, we found two sets of emergency rations, one set (incomplete) of maps, and one oil-can. It has plenty of oil, but was

leaky, and had ruined the maps, and one set of rations. I oiled the machines while Tsade divvied up the rations. We ate what was edible of the spoiled rations. She said nothing about the spoiled maps. I went through them looking to see if I could salvage some help from them, but each time I did so they seemed to have deteriorated further. What will we do without them, Tsade asked. Rely on our sense of direction, I said. You think it was the bears who saved us, Tsade said. Yes, I said. No, she said. It was the bears who saved us from the wolves; but it was the wolves who saved us from the bears. What about that squirrel, I asked her. There had been a lone squirrel there with a voice like a treble dissecting knife. The squirrel, she wondered. I wondered what trespass had justified its auricular corkscrew.

The return home began uneventfully. The world beneath us stretched out like a map. It was well supplied with rivers to follow. Which one should we choose, Tsade asked. You are good at choosing, I said. The obvious one to choose, she decided, is that one. It fell in leisurely harmonic curves to the south and west. So we chose it. As a choice, it was a good choice. To use the land one travels through as a map, however, is not without difficulties. The secret of not getting lost is to realize that as you travel forward the map changes; and you can't turn back to previous charts you've been using, to make corrections. Our scooters helped us. They had no qualms about the way we were going, but moved with a new energy, almost like horses on the return home.

They pulled us very fast down the harmonic curves of the river Tsade had chosen. Yet we seemed to be parachuting down in long slow cadences, suspended almost without motion. Every moment suggested syntactical links with the flat world of common, non-dreaming existence, the world we wake up into. In a tone-poem, the notes of a horn may suggest a forest scene. Some of these tonal similes were very fantastic: the conte ought to make some gesture toward them, however powerless to translate them accurately. Thus the scooters suggested the animal-machines of Descartes, the Rational Horses or Houynhnhmns of Swift, the human machines with an animal mind of twentieth-century psychiatry. From the mechanical cats of Descartes, able to feel no pain, yet able to mime it with exquisite accuracy, I went on to think of Descartes in a Quebec logger's jersey and boots, cutting down all the trees in the world he could, with his dubito as a double-bitted axe, to prove that the axe was real. At this point in my dream, in the exchanges of waking and sleeping, I thought of Reid MacCallum, who taught me the rudiments of Descartes' philosophy. What Descartes dreamed of, MacCallum said, was a mechanical world which could

be treated mathematically. It was at this point my career began, but it took a sudden comic turn, and a new look at Descartes through the eyes of Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. Tristram's autobiography is really Sterne's, ghosted by a running-down machine. Through an accident, Tristram at his conception is stamped with the image of a running down clock. His account of his life strikes a deadly satiric blow at the weakest point of mechanism, its failure to see that machines break down, need repairing, wear out, disintegrate. Tristram romanticises his physical breakdown. Similarly, developing science romanticised its growing awareness of the fatal flaw in mechanization. Today, the tendency of the machine to self-destruct, which Sterne points to, has become a destructive force threatening the entire globe with extinction. These were some of the thoughts that flashed through my dreaming mind as our faithful scooters carried us down one turn of the river after another on our way back home, or to some point where we could expect to be rescued from.

From time to time Tsade looked back over her shoulder to see if I was keeping up with her, and I would wave at her and she at me. Why my thoughts had become so gloomy, between these inter-personal exchanges, I don't know. Partly it was, I suppose, because I had furnished my mind with ideas from the books of writers who, though cheerful men, were unable to write about the world of today with much cheerfulness: Illych, Lifton, Ellul, McLuhan. Partly it was because of the fear in my heart that the beautiful river-scape we were passing through was being readied for Descartes' chain saw. We entered a wide river plain. Our scooters powered by gravity had carried us here as if they enjoyed their task. Now we would have to propel them. Tsade waved back to me suggesting a halt. I had no option but to agree, for at that moment my scooter collapsed under me. I was thrown into a thicket of grass, unhurt. My machine had completely disintegrated, as if it had exploded. I struggled to my feet only to see Tsade, a few car lengths ahead of me, flying through the air. Almost simultaneously with mine, her machine had exploded under her, disintegrated. The lush grass which had rescued me, broke her fall. It was as if our devoted servants the scooters, unable to serve us any longer, had decided to render up the ghost together. All that we could salvage from the double accident, were the two saddle-bags, containing one ration of food and a set of useless maps. I ran to Tsade with my saddle-bag, and she ran towards me with hers. You must be Dr. Livingstone, she said. And you must be Mr. Stanley's sister, I replied. A beautiful place to be rescued from, she said. Yes, I agreed. I wonder what caused it, she said. The accident, I asked. She seemed to be accusing

herself of having provoked it, by calling for a halt. Perhaps they chose this tuft of grass, as a soft spot to deposit us in, I said. Or the grass itself may have reached out to make our acquaintance. I admit I have a frivolous imagination. The word wonder, used at the scene of an accident, induces it to hallucinate. Perhaps, I said, the cause of the accident was the result of a conspiracy between our servants the scooters and their friends and our friends, the grasses, reeds, rushes, vetches, mosses. Every accident has its causes, I said, except one. Which one is that, Tsade asked me. The primal one of scientific belief, I said. And even that one leads most of us to wonder, what caused it. Like me, Tsade thought of our scooters more as friends than as mechanical servants. I don't like to leave them here, she said, without giving them a decent burial. I looked to where their ashes had fallen. Already the long grass was closing over them. I raised my eyes up, and thought I saw a speck, a disturbance, in the sky. It's a helicopter, Tsade assured me. We're rescued, she shouted. We're not only saved, I said. We are rescued. It hardly occurred to us, that since its crew wasn't looking for us, we mightn't be seen. We danced a 'here-we-go-round-the-maypole' dance of may-day supplication. But we soon saw that they had spotted us. Very cautiously they approached us, as if fearful of an ambush. They criss-crossed, then hovered over us. The chop-chop-chop of their rotors became so deafening that we put our hands over our ears and danced with elbows extended as if not wanting to hear the music we were dancing to. I wanted to shout to Tsade, this is ludicrous, but she couldn't have heard me. What was more ludicrous was that, when they had dropped down so close to us that we were almost blown away, they withdrew. It was as if we were being punished for the ingratitude with which we had rejected the vortex of atonality they lived in. But they didn't abandon us completely. They withdrew to a considerable height, and waited, directly over us. Then to our relief, other helicopters arrived. They circled around the waiting ship. I couldn't help wondering if what we had thought of as rescue, was a species of hostile arrest.

Then the assembled helicopters dropped to the ground, one by one. Their loud-hailers blasted messages to us, but these were too loud to be heard. We just stood there, waiting. When all had landed, and we were completely encircled, they switched off their engines. If this were a military operation, it was one of extreme tactical clumsiness. Possibly we were too inconsiderable a target, too unspecialized for its enormous power and complexity. If we had had the assistance of our scooters, we could have easily darted past these new high tech molesters, and evaded them, and escaped, as we escaped from the wolves. These technological transvestites

hadn't the expertise of the wolves, or even of the bears. These men, if they were men, and not robots, who tumbled out of the gunships, at first seemed like bears, without the majestic furs of these animals, and without the bouncy animal cunning of the bear. They were presumably totally frustrated by their anti-chemical, anti-biological warfare outfits, artificial armour which made it impossible for them to respond naturally to the evils that, if they had not created, had been magnified to infinity by them. An enormous battery of loud-hailers told us we were under arrest for violating their strategic space. Even when we sheltered our ears with our hands, it was impossible to make sense of what instructions were being blasted at us from all directions and in all directions. When they tried to handcuff Tsade she refused to co-operate. So they turned on me. I followed her example. We never heard a human voice. We dodged this way and that, and even began to relish our successful evasions. Our situation was painful, not pleasant, yet it was good to see that human beings could so easily stand off cybernetic monsters. In fact, what we were seeing (and hearing) was the last stage of development of the Cartesian animal-machine. This machine at first seemed to have acquired a human soul. That seemed to give it an utopian usefulness. But as the machine developed in complexity, so the psychical centre which controlled it, its transplanted cybernetic mind, reversed into a fiendish, suicidal, propensity. We heard the loud-hailers blaring out, don't bother with them. And the robot crewsmen, returned to their ships. These then started to lay a carpet of poison enough to take care of a battalion. To rid themselves of two ants, they would render an entire mountain range untenable, who knows for how long? When I saw we couldn't evade their unnatural excretions, I contracted every muscle in my body, let go of my dreaming body, and woke myself up.

It was the morning of October 8.

New Writing

SHIFT IN STRUCTURE erases my dreaming self. I sit on a bus and inscribe every frame with subtitles. But sitting to write my mind storms my desire, seeking a higher authority re: the assignation of beauty. What's beautiful here? What's the raw material I'll use to achieve the dazzling end-products needed to hand over for approval? And then be kissed. To be kissed! And who sits in my mental cupboard now? Barthes probably. Rustling like a nosy mother-in-law. Father-in-law? Oh god. Rustling as a god would in the picking of a sublime apple. "Do you know the consequences?" This is now a Booming voice. Blooming as all voices do once (I) hear them into something raw and welcome. Barthes talks about a love-object. I scan the room like an empress after my newest love. All the rest are pat, owned, but the one that has escaped my tongue—the cheaply dressed slave with her shoulder agape—Cinderella, I adore you! And then into this polemic I pour my middle-class consumerism, choosing her forlorn availability. But, maddeningly, this woman does not respond, staring as she is over the gorge of an urban river seeking her *own* raw material. She is dreaming a moving bus and the desirousness of her search. Abhorring structure but looking for a slave. Her arms are bent and cantilevered at the point where her hands press against her neck, this, really, this is what caught my breath to begin with. What spoke my "access." Now. She has stood dreamy-eyed long enough. "Look for work," I snap, *stop your meaningless dreaming*: there is no productivity without the rise to power of an organizing principle. Piffle. Pogwash. I know beneath this. I know I want her, want to own her, want to call her mine by my own constructed desire excluding hers. Want to fawn endlessly over the stretch of her arms bent that way. I lust her subject. She spins at me and says, "Go away, I'm waiting for my lover." My bus lurches to a stop. I get off and walk to the lookout. The cascading river struggles against bulwarks of factory drainage pipes. For the first time I'm interested in fairy tales. The woman below sitting with her feet dangling in the polluted water cries tears the size of apples. She lifts her chin and moans "Mother, mother." When her eyes open I see her. I recognize she is my great-granny. Like all the women in my family, age has shrunk her body to unbelievably childlike proportions. I fling myself toward her,

feeling the bridge spring back from my feet. She lifts to meet me. Our collision transforms us both into teenage waitresses, wearing gold and red striped aprons, and perfectly timing our strides so our opposite arms, bent to carry our trays, are instituted like the symmetry of a sentence. We love We. My face breaks into smiles of uncontrollable joy. The drive-in customers honk "Break it up." We are wanted in opposite directions. The way slave families are usually torn apart. One country, like an emissary ark, deigns to accept one, the hardest worker, according to immigration laws. In accordance with the organizing principles supported by the International Council of Desirousness. "We want the one with her arms bent back." But she is waiting for me. She is dreaming me back into her bus. When I arrive, out of breath and apologizing for my lateness, we unfold our arms and begin to embrace. *What did you dream,* we ask.

SHAPED BY THE FATHER'S FICTION. The patriarch whose face cuts a hollywood cleft in the handpainted softness of my father's silverprint image. Chisel and guage. Tuck my girlhood's lack of guile in this cleft. But I nestle near his mouth yearning for the relaxation of his lips into my *perfection*. My small arms and legs in a white sleeper blossom from his teeth like an orchid. Or film-noir cigarette smoke. Or the way a mouth opens onto your swollen tip. The 1920s backdrop of diesel ships crossing to America with seeds of olive trees fingered nervously in immigrant pockets like particles of a new language. Why can't I breathe Daddy into this cleft? And my mother's self-ordained presidency of the Canadian Sinatra fan club, her unmasked passion, then. A time-lapsed exposé of the classic female fan mirroring the emotional pitch of her idol. Streaming tears into the architecture of both their profiles, Sinatra's and his, my father's. Then, it is for me, drinking this preposterous man into the sexual throat, like a buff-glass bottle of Coke. Coca-cola. Brown liquid eyes of a child-boy and through their lens to daughter's guilt at mistaking her parent for, equally, Sinatra, Clift, and the patriarch. Who's in her chin? she said, seeing your father glimpsing from a dim angle inherited from the stylistic biases of continental court-painting. From each darker slit a pointing hand withdraws. You too can see yourself in frame. Shaped by the image's falseness. My father's particular clefted chin looks on, like I would, eyeing the cloaked photographer. Wanting to achieve a "little man" illusion—for his longish curls are coded differently now undercut by his buttoned white collar. The flash stipples my guilelessness. I pose ready to adore the chin he holds just above my shiny black bangs. I want to kiss him relentlessly. To blight his distance. Make an imprecation on his star-quality, where I can see myself talking, the sound turned low, my miniature lips below his father-kiss. *Frankie*, she says, *do it now*.

Grace

"The practice of evening beginning each night. Evening began each night to be practiced.

"I touch you with my mouth. A commonplace. Suck you skin your feet feel mine. I erect a city of sex in certain all words the ordinary are inside.

"Crowds of people enter, hats and gawky appendages metal often rings, the glitter through one door, pushed. We never go unpopulated and we make some noise.

"A well of facts, images, recognitions in stream, inside a day for working for banal service take the order of that greasy man scratch on his outturned gaze which eats you as you serve the food.

"The ladder to the roof you climb and disappears as crutches prefer going unnoticed. A simplistic vision of farmland from the roof, with tiles soaked through, precarious, and I stand arabesque on this roof.

"Girl her father hands between clutched stroked gentle.

"Girl her mother hands between clutched stroked gentle.

"Urban shopping mall neon dizzying we lose sentry of each other hip-level she disappears. A night the door reverberates. She slams the heavy door then the screen door, echo slap.

"Control the food as bribe control us eat together with one, him, a separate table.

"Up the canal, blue alterior with fishes or admitting, needles. Embryonic sucked from plant; can't settle in or down, vomits.

"Men piss on women and all the passersby through street grates outside the restaurant, railway station, view of stack and the accumulated orange sky, underpass stink of wet and graffitied.

"Just coming you start to pee think and driving the university for blueberries. Squat clitoris stained, girls and thigh muscles."

theory: when the text begins to describe you. un-write you. write itself out of you. a foamy skirt. life ring at arm's length from your upright figure.

inventory: in the satchel there must always be: toothpaste. a map. b.'s scarf, spare quarters. cream, ticket. old journal.

intention: Margaret wants to move in a clear direction. through rooms of liquid. wet full spaces. the threads catching on Virginia Woolf's undertow of fish. the fish darting through consciousness. essential losses. wants to move through losses, their inscription on all her rooms. Margaret wants the wet singular stone. ocean.

fantasy: i want to consider issues but see them steamily. from my bathtub. Gail Scott's. see points of skin first which touch me. the wall vapourizes. an ellipsis through white paint. see my mother's stout back, its camouflage-grey shirt. ghost departure.

autobiography: always the spine twisted out of access. independent axis. her private world. my temperature gathering heat from the water. baptism of individual vision, by steam.

apology: rooming house washroom, what cracks or fissures there are line up, write themselves in stereotype. i don't know this brand of lack. lack knowing.

diagnosis: split-off head from heart. air in the veins. treacherous bubble called "world". Margaret's world in cut-away, a textbook diagram, a family background one carries in a low-floating speech bubble. cartoon history. unlaughable.

speculum: to slide my frame of reference through the head of a pin; sew it in feminism. fabricate mother. cord of relevance not relative. projection one can do without the body, or letting the body come later. allows the bathtub. keeps the heat in. needing it.

A river makes noise like a child crying. The banks are kneaded crust. Up each birch spire the sky sits, a singing bird.

She is crushed inside the canal of her mother's birthing process. Her arms and legs are moulded into her torso. Her shoulders jut into her cheeks. The sphincter of her mother's muscle is constricting along the full length of her small body.

The highway is a symbol of connective energy. The cars are blood.

The concert will begin at seven thirty, as usual. Mrs. _____ is wrapping a woven shawl onto her chest.

The mud has dried along the threshold of her dwelling with tracks creeping into the first room. The orange dawn winnows through each thatch and aggregates again in the bathroom sink. She is not home, but in her menstrual hut 2 miles into the bush.

I hear the geese arriving just as I wake, their loud call trumpeting for a moment then flying past, lost.

In this canal the walls are tough blood. They smell of fire. she sweats.

Notes on *Attention* ("Narration")

Review
Attention
by Robert Grenier
Institute of Further Studies, 1985

Narrative need not be model of attention

*
And the world is not 'given' by but is constructed by language process attention. Which itself can be an attention to meanderings of MEANING not to story, sequence

*
Body politic goes farther than ears, eyes. WHOLE body — body of sense

*
Sense not a commanded showing — whatever 'shows' may be mere show, obfuscation

*
Contradiction or confusion between words 'in mouth' and words 'in eye'

*
"polis is / eyes" or, polis is negotiation of *sense*, not all reaped in eyes

*
Not just 'joyful seeing' but more invisible phenom thought through

*
I don't *sound* world as narrative

*
Things can be thought in space, in relationships of what surrounds, confines, boundaries, limits, horizons — concentric circles, ripples in pond

*
Story or narrative 'line' gives the narrowness of it

*
Estimates of 'scale, range, power' can be spatial, where, again, the metaphor is one of understanding

*
If narrative creates a suspicion of "group new testament" — its yearning for order — too closed

*
All this 'bidden, given' — mystical illusion. Is there only composition? In wch case may be an aspiring for 'fit', adequacy, as in explanation not story

*
Of course you can define narrative so broadly, as is fashionable, that it includes everything — and therefore ceases to be of much (discriminating) *use*

*
Narrative may be "how we know what we know is happening" but how is that 'what' built up? Sense is a making — situating that 'what' (what?) and 'who' in an explanatory space

*
An *account* isn't just narration =. And psychology (or social placement) may matter: an image of 'layers' (of significance, value) not of discrete 'events' lined up

*
Venture capital may be suggestive model of narrative — a deterritorialized flow that can 'work' 'anywhere', since its story/narrating lacks any need for a concentric/contextual rooting in socialized comprehensibility

*
It's the gatekeepers (you too?) that are always complaining about ('just') "'experiment'." We're supposed to subsist on their authenticity?

*

Of course, anything I call non-narrative, you can include in a definition of 'narrative' that is immobilized by indigestion after devouring so much alien material — why have your definitions overeat so?

*

If 'sequence of events' "as we commonly know it in America is a front," where is the hubris (similarly American) that claims it can discover the 'real' (or realer) "actual story." And that hubris, typically, aligned with a resistance to 'experiment'

*

Narration is not the moral responsibility. Such prescriptions ring hollow. Sense and meaning may well be much more complicated tasks

*

Narrative isn't the only, or even the most important "measurer" — again, SCALE registers the work of explanation, comprehension in a non-narrative way

*

"'necessary' alliances" more likely to be matters of sensible-making, then of sequence — Sense itself may be a social necessity but no particular sequences may be

*

"dumb show of kings" pretty apt image of history without point. "Point" is not narrative. (cf. 'illocutionary utterance')

*

And context may be a container — involved in a work of containment which needs to be re-grasped

*

Narrative, thus fetishized, seems the perfect site for a new formalism — the heroic, or giddy, or trimly irresponsible, avoidance of exploring the social relations of sense-making

*

The common disdain for metaphoric (paradigmatic) relations of value in favor of metonymic (syntagmatic) ones — revealed here. Certainly limits comprehension (just what venture capital needs not)

*

If "narrative is just the minutiae" we may notice the privatizing complacency of it: what is not minutiae is the encompassing context in which these delicately-focussed-upon (or cutely-focussed-upon) narratives are located

*

Can't see the forest for the micro-narratives of tree's individualized (and individualizing) evolution, shifts

*

If "writing celebrates this order of the syllables" it can do so to explore the alliances/fits of sense-making (which answers "WHY?" ((explanatory)) and not just "how something occurs as it is" (which is equipped to deal largely with 'how?' (descriptive) questions

*

Instead of the "might have been" (with its so-American pragmatism and event-worship — also, yes, often visual), why not the contextual issues of the "might have meant"

*

The order of events is 'significant' largely in the formalisms of structural linguistics (the signs); context provides social significance

*

If we are only concerned with the precise "'timing'" and "'panoply of events'," this begins to sound like a formalism of event

*

Narrative as de-socializing

*

Instead, to make words help turn things away from their condition as meaningless (meaning not given *with* and along with them, at least) items: to help reveal the social tissue around 'things' that make them more than things

*

"purely the possible" — an empty catalog, or shopping list? What about the items that are made *less* and *more* likely (or less and more likely to be grasped) — and what gives them these likelihoods? Likely, something that won't figure in a narrative

*
Common response at poetry readings, faced with recitals of events and observations: 'who cares'?

*
If the task of narrative is to make words "'somehow' the same things as things," we have the neat social trick performed on us with our help: don't worry if the things are drained of social value by a larger context; instead, narrating will make it palatable

*
"Think don't narrate" —

"When a Potato Talks, You Listen": Neolithic Brotherhood Notes

Review
The Collected Poems of George Butterick
Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987
Introduction by Robert Creeley

Like all of the best poems of the best students of Charles Olson (Ed Dorn, Joel Oppenheimer, Ed Sanders, John Wieners, Fred Wah, Duncan McNaughton, Stephen Rodefer) George Butterick's best poems spill images instanter upon another—they dazzle. Last year was a year beyond sad for those of us involved in the practice, five essential poets died: Robert Duncan, Joel Oppenheimer, Raymond Carver, bpNichol and George Butterick. I'm sorry I didn't get to see George's poems more gradually while he lived. I certainly followed with keen interest his monumental work with the Olson papers at the University of Connecticut at Storrs. I'm sorry he didn't live on if only to pleasure my synapses into the next century. I was in college with George, we were Robert Duncan's students together. I knew his earlier broadside poems which reflected the positive influence, on both of us, of avatar Jack Clarke's intense reading of Blake and Plotinus. Those poems contained beauty and I was jealous.

Two things I should confess right off the bat: when I first saw the book I laughed and said it looked like the Collected Poems of Enver Hoxa, as if they'd gone glasnost one better and recruited the design team from Progress Publishers to edit for the Poetry Room (i.e., Robert Bertholf) of the State University of New York at Buffalo. The other thing I should confess: the most recent hits, the current, are my frenzy, so I began reading this book beyond the middle—page 139 to be exact—and I'd recommend that everybody, especially those impatient for the goodies, do the same thing. I'd suggest you start with *Repartee with the Mummy* (1987), then go on to *Mummy Strands and Others* (1987), then read *The Three-Percent Stranger* (1986), then if you hadn't enough yet you'd read "Rune

Power" (1983), *Reading Genesis by the Light of a Comet* (1976) and finally *The Norse* (1973), which is the first section of this volume.

The Norse is the kind of mistake many students of Olson make—as pre-poets really: poem as anthropology telegram. Olson lets them in on the Williams analogy (poets make poems like gods make everything) and they think he means poet = god. Another creation myth, albeit well done, it remains unfortunately tedious by association, re-creation. And though this is a better poem than most of its type, he's no Sanders or Rothenberg; still you can clearly see there's a poet in there peeking out between the lines. The better elements here are closer to Spicer than Olson; but unlike Spicer, *duende* eludes Butterick in this poem, which reads more like some fulfilled requirement for the language doctor's license.

Repartee with The Mummy takes riskier leaps, hews closer to the colloquial: trimmer lingo, less precious, less pompous, less fearful, cooler and at the same time hot hot near mirage hot. It seems as if somewhere around 1980 George sheds the skin of the uptight scholar and begins to talk his own talk. The lesson of Whalen's and Dorn's poems finally sinks in and George starts cooking, gets funnier, flutters from attention to attention, tossing off sparks, minor but slippery postmodern illuminations, sometimes the most we can reasonably hope for in these decades of double doubt—and we should be happy to get that—the ear delights, the intellect delights, two out of three ain't bad. He doesn't make me cry like Sharon Doubiago can make me cry, he doesn't make me burst out laughing like Crad Kilodny can make me burst out laughing; but he makes me pay attention, sympathize and respect his accomplishment.

Robert Creeley speaks for us all in his Introduction:

> For my own part, George Butterick is the deeply reassuring presence of intelligent response—however awkwardly that puts it. James has this quality, as does Montaigne, Turgenev, and Wyatt, to make an unexpected company. It is, finally, what specific humanness can find 'to say' about its own experience, so that expression becomes both the fact of feeling and the reflection upon what's provoked it: '. . . meaning is the laughter of the mind.'

Angel Work
From *Reading Genesis by the Light of a Comet*

Air finally sedate
and I've got it back under the cover of cloud.
Hard to hold on. Earth bucking.
Must be what they call men's
will.
And in large sweeps.
Can it be long this light is done?
Ah, but now color paths.
Light is its own reward. Tensors sing!

There is the choir of delight, the music of the spheres
even in the plant's heart.

Turn to face
shriek from rim of atmosphere. Denominator on its way.
Energy worm. Metrical sutures bored open.
Side system limps up. Port hollow drops
light and grave matter, blows protonic grease
from bulkhead. Up scintilla! Light maneuvers
for matter. Bring down the hysteron bandit!
Swerve! swerve!
There it goes,
lost in age spin.
Still earth to do
& occasional men's wills.

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The Final Issue
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& Charlene Diehl-Jones

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Robert Kroetsch Interviewed

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