

Notes on The Sad Phoenician's Other Woman:  
Experiencing Robert Kroetsch's Poetry In A Fever

I knew of Kroetsch, had heard references to him all the time, which is no surprise given his status as an influential and well-known Canadian writer, but I'd never read his work. In the winter of 2008, I stumbled upon "Completed Field Notes, The Long Poems of Robert Kroetsch" (the University of Alberta Press, 2000).

I don't know about you, but for me there are so many writers I hear about who I mean to get around reading some day. Robert Kroetsch was like that for me, and when I finally did get around to him, I was blown away.

I love his wit, his double entendres, his easygoing style. I felt, in part, like I was home, like I'd found an influence. Before Kroetsch I'd also been galvanized by the writing of Lisa Robertson and Dennis Cooley in much the same way and had to explore such things as the long line and the sentence based on their work.

In this case, I couldn't help but write a poem of my own, inspired by "The Sad Phoenician" (first published in its entirety by Coach House Press in 1979). I read Kroetsch in a fever (literally, due to a flu, I had a 100 degree temperature) and I wrote "The Sad Phoenician's Other Woman" (above/ground press, 2008) in a fever too...in just over three days and three nights. I really did feel a quickening and a shiver as I read

This stone  
becomes a hammer  
of stone, this maul

is the colour  
of bone (no,  
bone is the colour  
of this stone maul).

The rawhide loops  
are gone, the  
hand is gone, the  
buffalo's skull  
is gone;

the stone is  
shaped like the skull  
of a child.

[I from Stone Hammer Poem, Prologue and reprinted as part of the *Stone Hammer Poems* in 1975 by Oolichan Books and included in the "Completed Field Notes"]

That was the first poem of Kroetsch's I ever read, and I had to read more; I've never been so glad that I had a whole thick book of long poems to discover. We were in the middle of that crazy snow storm last year where the snow kept falling and falling and falling, I was sick and couldn't go anywhere. And I didn't want to.

In his author's note at the back of the book, Kroetsch explains that the "Completed Field Notes" represents a body of work which appeared over a period of fifteen years, each long poem published individually over the years and later together as "Field Notes" (General Store Publishing, 1981), then by McClelland and Stewart as "Completed Field Notes" in 1989 and when that was almost out of print, reprinted by the University of Alberta Press in 2000 with an introduction by Kroetsch's long time friend and another renowned Canadian writer, Fred Wah.

In the author's note, Kroetsch writes "Since the eloquence of failure may be the only eloquence remaining in this our time, I let these poems stand as the enunciation of how I came to a poet's silence. And I like to believe that the sequence of poems, announced in media res as continuing, is, in its acceptance of its own impossibilities, completed."

I think this idea of failure, the poetics of failure is what draws me to Robert Kroetsch's writing. I have always been intimidated by writing that seems to come from a voice on high from writers who, deliberately or not, portray themselves as having the answers. Writers like Kroetsch (and there is really no one like him) don't promise answers or some kind of heightened and sensitive insight based on their role as Poet with a capital P. I don't believe anyone has that kind of role. I don't like the way it distances the reader and the writer. Kroetsch's writing didn't make me feel distant from him or his work, but rather kindred.

In his introduction, Fred Wah talks about how Kroetsch's poem "Mile Zero" "attempts to avoid design, to occupy an unresolved transition. The poem as field becomes a translucent white surface of trajectory, a field of particles that, above all else, seeks constant motion and resists rest." and later...

"Think of 'field notes' as temporary, as momentary gestures that interpolate possibility. Perhaps even as investigations into the potential for narrative. Or at least the poem's capacity for narrative. Then think of narrative not as a predictable line of action and consequence but as a maze of sudden twists, obstacles, impossibilities, possibilities.

Kroetsch's Field notes are not only lessons in the naïveté of completion, lessons, in fact, on being lost, there are also a manual of field note technique."

This notion of a long poem as a maze of "twists, obstacles, impossibilities and possibilities" excites me and makes me want to write more long poems. I think the long poem gives one space to set up and shape these twists and gives the reader space, time and rhythm to become compelled by them.

I particularly like the idea of "in media res" or starting in the middle or as I like to think of it, depicting moments as they occur rather than seeing them in hindsight. I was trying

to do this with “The Sad Phoenician’s Other Woman,” a long poem about a woman who, to quote “The Sad Phoenician,” “now loves adverbs.” I wrote the poem in the spirit of the Kroetsch poem and worked some of his lines from the poem in my own, playing with his ideas of working with other sources to create a poem. Like Kroetsch, I had fun disrupting systems, particularly grammar. I used grammar as a means to mislead and create ambiguity in the poem.

Some readers have described my poem as a poem of conquest since it engages with the sexual exploits a woman initiates with various male accomplices. The tone is a repetition of the tongue-in-cheek bravado from the Kroetsch poem.

In their interview with Robert Kroetsch, in *Poets Talk*, The University of Alberta Press, 2005, Pauline Bunting and Susan Rudy bring up the role of gender and domesticity in *The Sad Phoenician*. Rudy says “...once a woman tries to articulate the banal, the everyday, and the ordinary, what she’s articulating in the first instance is its oppressiveness. What she might need to do first is to critique, not celebrate it.”

I didn’t read this interview until long after I’d written the poem, but what I was trying to do with *The Sad Phoenician’s Other Woman* with the female character in the poem was certainly to celebrate a woman’s freedom to choose her own sexuality but also to poke fun at and play with the dynamic and insanity of sexual relationships between people.

Frankly as a writer and as a woman, I’m tired of hearing about how oppressed I am. I’m not. I do what I want and I say what I want. I always have, but particularly in the form of a poem, I have felt free to play and yes to get things wrong. I make no apologies for playing around with language, breaking rules and fucking around in my work. I am pleased to have the opportunity to do so.

In “Jack Spicer to Federico Garcia Lorca” in “Poetics of the New American Poetry,” Grove Press, New York, 1973, Jack Spicer said “There’s plenty of fudging that’s allowed in this kind of thing. But the old thing that René Char said, he said that the poet should have a sign on his wall saying, ‘CHEAT AT THIS GAME.’”

I love to cheat. What I like about writing poetry is trying to get away with things. I enjoy rebelling against convention and constraints, whether they be grammatical or societal. “The Sad Phoenician’s Other Woman” is one of my attempts at such.

One of the things that I enjoy playing with in the long poem form is the notion of delay. Rob McLennan (& perhaps others) has talked about the long poem as a poetics of delay, which is one of the techniques apparent in Kroetsch’s poems, especially “the Sad Phoenician.” I loved the way Kroetsch used the conjunctions “and” & “but” to cause a disjunction in the narrative and at times to misdirect the flow of the narrative, putting a rock in the river to change the tempo and movement of the water.

What other pieces in the book did I enjoy? All of them, all of them. I can’t give highlights or tell you about what fun I had in “The Winnipeg Zoo” or talk more about the contrasts

in tone from one long poem to another. The whole book was one of the most joyful and mind opening experiences with poetry that I have experienced since I began to study contemporary poetry in earnest only five short years ago.

And just when I thought I couldn't be more excited by Kroetsch's poetry, when, after my fever broke, I continued to read his works, I discovered "the Hornbooks of Rita K." (the University of Alberta Press, 2001). The book is written in the voice of Raymond, the intimate friend of the aptly initialled poet Rita Kleinhart, who disappeared from the Museum of Modern Art in Frankfurt, or so Raymond tells us. I loved the way Kroetsch plays with reality here, and the sense of play all the way through.

This is evocative too of Rob Winger's "Muybridge's Horse" (Nightwood Editions, 2007), another poem I read before I embarked upon "The Sad Phoenician's Other Woman". In his book, Winger also plays with the notion of reality, specifically what is known and documented publically and what may have occurred behind the scenes. This is also what I get from Kroetsch's work and what I tried to achieve in "The Sad Phoenician's Other Woman," to create a world which questions and plays with fact and extrapolation, the effect of opinion and distortion of reality.

As a rank beginner to poetry, I learn by example (actually I'll always be a beginner and I always hope to learn by reading). I'm only just understanding, thanks to writers like Kroetsch, that it's possible to write in a voice other than one's own. The voice(s) in this book open up all kinds of possibilities for what can be done in a poem. Same thing with "the Snowbird Poems" (the University of Alberta Press, 2004). These voices allow the writer to get away with things, he might not otherwise be able to, such as parodies in rhyme form.

What Robert Kroetsch has done for me is that he has given me a gift:

he has opened up my writing to endless possibility of play;

he has made me rethink my recalcitrant perspective on narrative poetry, something I used to avoid at all costs, and find a way to write poetry using devices that I previously thought were only acceptable for fiction;

he has made me want to read other long poems, mentioned and discussed in his brilliant essay "For Play and Entrance: the Canadian Contemporary Long Poem in "The Lovely Treachery of Words, Essays Selected and New (Oxford University Press, 1989);

he has made me want to read and write more.

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Journal of the Arts (Calgary, Alberta), Rampike (Windsor, Ontario), and Ryerson University's Whitewall Review. Her chapbooks are "Welcome to Earth: poem for alien(s)" (Book Thug, 2008); "The Sad Phoenician's Other Woman" (above/ground press, 2008); "Eleanor" (above/ground press, 2007). Amanda is the managing editor of Bywords.ca and the Bywords Quarterly Journal and runs the new micropress AngelHousePress ([www.angelhousepress.com](http://www.angelhousepress.com)). For more information on upcoming readings and recent publications, please visit [www.amandaearl.com](http://www.amandaearl.com).