

Binder Twine

Around the supper table, that night, we debated the stamina of head lettuce, the taper of carrots, the yield of sweet corn, the impossibility of melons.

—Kroetsch Fonds, Box 11, File 1

To see more than can be anticipated. To be surprised.

—Frank Davey, “The Language of the Canadian Long Poem”

What follows is a catalogue of musings on binder twine, impossibility, and the dynamics of surprise. As I began to write it in the late summer of 2008, I was eighteen months from retirement. I anticipated—albeit ready to be surprised—that after I retired I would write little if any literary criticism. In some mood of brooding nostalgia, I asked myself which, of all the poems I’ve read and taught and loved, would I still and again want to write about. Which do I want to grow into and up in?

Such questions—what is your favourite novel? what Canadian poem is most important to you?—are inherently dumb. I’ve always ducked them by mumbling that I have hundreds of favourites, and their yield shifts by occasion and mood. The most important poem is the one I am reading with my students in tomorrow morning’s class.

But, paradoxically, I had a ready answer. I knew one poem that would resist my resisting, a poem that, maybe because it’s a chorus of questions, badgered me to write back. Rote questions and responses, Robert Kroetsch’s *Seed Catalogue* (1977) reminds us, are honest and honorable. Unquestionably. Highest pedigree. Trust the superlatives, stupid.

Kroetsch makes this poem because he trusts himself to answer a question not unlike the one I’d asked myself: *what’s the most important book in my community?* For my community? As in a catechism, whose form the

poem often evokes, Kroetsch provides a confident answer: the annual seed catalogue is the home poem, and to persuade us, he happily reproduces multiple unadorned excerpts from a seed catalogue. The poetic catalogue grows from these yet is neither very *long*, nor very *poetic*—at least by the standards set by other works for which we use that label. Not as long as *Paterson*. Not as storying as the *Odyssey*. Not as exuberant as *Song of Myself*. Not as radical in language as *The Martyrology*. Not as processual as *Steveston*. But as surprising as any of these.

Bob Kroetsch was writer-in-residence at the University of Lethbridge in the spring of 1976.¹ At the time, I was Chair of the English Department there, and its first specialist in Canadian literature. One day, we went to *The Harvester* for lunch. A few weeks later, Bob showed me this draft of a section of the manuscript:

But how?

Terry Heath:

“The homesteaders sowed them
Like wild oats in the tame
And now farmers harvest them as hay
And weeds in mid-summer
So that their seeds don’t lower
The grade at the mill.”

Actually, he had come to the University of Lethbridge to see an art show. I tried to show him the place in the valley of the Oldman River where Rudy Wiebe said the Bloods surprised the Crees. Laurie Ricou took us to lunch at The Harvester. The waitress tried to tell us we were eating beef Stroganoff. It tasted of cauliflower.

Wild/
Oats.

Snow/
Flowers. (Ricou, Personal Papers)

That passage did not, except for a few phrases, make its way into the published version of the poem—a characteristic omission I want to comment on later.

But the cauliflower stew/soup(?) we ate at The Harvester does say something about the importance of the poem to me: I felt I was sharing in the gestation of the poem. Many of my colleagues, then and now, would say the same. I could help that poem grow. I knew that it would, when it appeared in print, be in some sense *our* poem.

In several senses, of course, I did not have a personal connect. I didn't grow up on a farm. But we did have a large garden, for a few years, in both front yard and back. And its digging, planting, weeding (I hated it), cultivating, and picking was a big part of our summers. The McKenzie Seed plant—one of whose annual catalogues was Kroetsch's inspiration—did loom over downtown Brandon, centrally, just off the main street: it was our town's largest building. But, despite its prominence, for us as kids it was a mysterious place, inaccessible. I wonder now, why as school children we mounted productions of "The Pirates of Penzance," and went to the Exhibition Grounds to see Queen Elizabeth, but we never toured this business we knew was important to the city.² When I went to Brandon College, the *library*—Bob would appreciate this—was named in honour of A.E. McKenzie. The library as seed bed.

But, beyond any immediate personal connection, I value *Seed Catalogue* because it liberated Canadian poetry and English-Canadian poets. Kroetsch selected, as his inspiration and form, a book of words commonplace (if hyperbolic) and utilitarian, the one true book for an aliterary community. The move allowed him to reinvent that community's understanding of poetry—as he did for many communities of readers beyond rural, agricultural Alberta. He listens to the poetry in his own home: "You could grow cabbages / in those ears." And maybe with this line, on the poem's first page, the poem begins to write itself home (to his ancestral Germany, as to the family farm near Heisler, Alberta), suggesting we listen again to the poems we've forgotten, attend anew to poetry we'd somehow come to believe did not count.

In the 1950s, downtown Brandon was a community centre, and a type. Many people you knew would be wandering in Eaton's and savouring banana cake at the lunch counter in Woolworth's. Just across 10th Street from the hulking seed plant were the offices and presses of the daily newspaper, *The Brandon Sun*. That's where my Dad worked, as Assistant Advertising Manager, a job that educated him in a love for the surprises of language. I write all this—as an editor I'd be tempted to delete all of it, and scribble "so what?"—because Kroetsch's poem is a homage to the poetry in the niceties exchanged in the aisles of Eaton's, in the debates at the lunch counter about the stamina of head lettuce. It's been some long years since I've written much about "prairie" writing. So, more nostalgia, I want to write here back to my home, to pay its language homage, as I pay homage to a poet who has been mentor, friend, and inspiration.

Catalogue and Collaboration

I'm having a bit of spring fever, and that sets a westerner to looking at seed catalogues.

—Kroetsch, Letter to George Melnyk, 5 March 1976

Catalogue implies system, a counting up, in its root sense, a reckoning. Kroetsch's adapted catalogue shows scant evidence of system—not alphabetic, nor clustered/ordered by theme, nor image, nor Linnaeus.³ True, the sections are numbered sequentially from 1 to 10, and some are subdivided a-b-c. But Kroetsch exploits the anticipated ordering of the catalogue just in order to see more than To read this catalogue is to be surprised by its contents. It could be a binder. Although, in conceiving the poem as “documentary” he evidently considered his book to be a *record*.

Whatever its system, its ordering and scope, a catalogue is seldom the work of a single individual. The catalogue is not only for the community—and available for use beyond predicting or imagining—it is invariably by the community, or by some community. Kroetsch makes such collaborative composition exuberantly, somehow almost randomly, explicit and available.

McKenzie's (multiple anonymous authors') descriptions of the seeds are quoted, presumably without alteration, mostly as the unlikely epigraphs for the poem's sections. Intersecting the voices of the creators of text, are those of the *users* of the catalogue, the labour-ers. They write the testimonials, in prose; we read them as poets. Kroetsch collaborates with those unknowing poets. The context he establishes reveals the poem. The anonymous, unwitting poet is outed. Also collaborating are the anonymous authors of playground rhymes, cautionary maxims, Catholic liturgy, bad farmyard jokes, nursery rhymes. Then, too, the *real* writers, some named, some not, come in to help: Shelley and Blake, Wiebe, Crozier, Scriver, Barclay, Purdy, Watson, Bacque. This list is the shortened form. The catalogue of collaborators could be considerably lengthier. Some are easy to identify. Many are not.

Permission

Potato pancakes with chokecherry jelly. Potato soup.

Escalloped potatoes. Riced potatoes.

Baked potatoes with sirloin. As simple as that.

—Kroetsch Fonds, Box 11, File 1

Kroetsch foregrounds his form by celebrating the seeds in a catalogue of catalogues. At one point, he drafts a catalogue devoted solely to the (very grounded) potato. First, the sequence of its planting. Then a verse paragraph

listing the potato dishes he can think of. Or is this list, too, implicitly collaborative: a result of a conversational gambit: “how many potato dishes can you name?” “As simple as that,” he writes exultantly at the end of the catalogue. I read this passage as a tribute to the down-to-earth ordinariness of the commonplace tuber. It’s a simple meat and potatoes culture he honours. Melons are surely impossible. But potatoes are everywhere, easy to grow, adaptable—and, they infuse the soil with the nitrogen to nurture still other vegetables.⁴

But I read the phrase another way as well. “As simple as that” registers as a gleeful exclamation. Pick an everyday staple of your life. Write down its name and stick with it. List its many variations. There, I’ve made myself a poem. That is all it takes. What a surprise. It’s my poem for my family. One potato, two potato. Three potato. Four.⁵

If it’s as simple as that, then the seed catalogue will encourage the aspiring artist in a hostile climate. How do you grow a poet? Significantly, with the exception of Wiebe, the poets named by first name only “Lorna [Crozier] & Byrna [Barclay], Ralph [Ring] & Steve [Scriver]” are all of the next generation. (*Completed Field Notes* 40) Should such younger poets be buffaloes by the grandeur of the capital “L” Literary, or intimidated by the glories of capital “P” Poetry, they might listen to the phrases spoken along the furrows, or around the supper table. They can be confident they will find there an unexpected and genuine poetry, and they will find material to play with and transform into poetry.

As simple as something that we cook and eat every day. Another dimension of the poem of the poetic and unpoetic is the recognition of the ways in which language, so infinitely combinable, extendable, and unimaginable as it is for poet and English teacher and critic—and Kroetsch is all these inseparably—limits our understanding of the world. The poem acknowledges, I think, à la David Abram, the knowledges beyond—or prior to—alphabetic culture.

The implicit and generous permissiveness in Kroetsch’s poem rests also in its profligacy of forms. It is a catalogue of verbal forms, from haiku to epic, from letter to multiple-choice exam. And, in its implicit postmodern ludic adventuring, it keeps saying OK, then, let’s try this and see where it goes.

In Kroetsch’s multiple choice, no one answer is right. All are potential. Each word is polyvalent, ready to be clicked on to, and to show another link. Paradoxically, then, it can be, and you can be, intimately local by being bold with the notational system(s) and eclectic choice of forms of postmodern poetics.

The Empty Binder

I'm not a gopher

The gopher said.

—Kroetsch Fonds, Box 11, Holograph note, Draft Section 4

Seed Catalogue is polyvalent. It makes multiple connections through a multiplicity of catalogues. It's a catalogue of forms. But also a catalogue of writers, those listed, cited, companionably overheard. The number would be considerable. Beyond those named, many appear in the form of intertexts—more intertexts than one reader could confidently enumerate—and in several cases (as with the literal catalogue that is Kroetsch's model) their authors/originators are unknown or anonymous.

Probably most intriguing in this regard is the exuberant litany—and catalogue—of absences that un-composes the second part of Section 4, and then redirects the plot of the poem. Here is Kroetsch turning the shrewd observations of Wallace Stegner into privative hymn. Stegner: "Education tried, inadequately and hopelessly, to make a European of me" (24); "For most of us, the language of literature is to some extent unread, because school has always been separate from life" (26). Kroetsch: "the absence of both Sartre and Heidegger // . . . the absence of Aeneas" (35-36). The absence of Lord Nelson is an absence of a swashbuckling history. The absence of the Cathédrale de Chartres is the absence of memorable spectacular architecture. The absence of clay and wattles is the absence of heightened literary imagery.

But the absence(s) are, of course, each and all ironic. Sartre and Chartres are present, the signs of *real* culture (and sweetly rhyming), even on a farm outside Heisler. It's the local resonance that's absent. The collaboration is, then, the paradoxical collaboration with the *empty*, the unlocated, the world that exists in language only. For a long time, collaboration has had a pejorative edge along with its warm fuzzy side: to cooperate, usually willingly, with an enemy, especially with an enemy occupying one's own country. I would argue that Kroetsch trusts this complicated paradox enthusiastically. It's what makes his poem more than just another maverick adoption of a non-literary prosaic model rejecting the lyre and the lute. What we have, in a curious way, is collaboration in the sense of consorting with the enemy. Maybe Kroetsch is both resisting *and giving in*. I don't know quite how to discriminate the attentive seeding and nurturing, but it does seem to me that Kroetsch does not want to assimilate the poems

he *works with* (*col* with + *labor* work). It's not as if he's rewriting them, or even somehow calling attention to their unacknowledged poetry—except obviously by establishing a context—but somehow, like the hired man and the catalogue and binder twine—they are just there, essential, in their own being, honoured. I mean both playground rhymes and Aeneas.

In one of the handwritten notes in which Kroetsch contemplates answering the questions he poses, he lists, under the heading “How do you grow a poet?” some potential respondents. The names appear in a column, filling most of an eight and a half by eleven inch sheet:

[Andrew] Suknaski
 [Rudy] Wiebe
 [Lorna] Uher [Crozier]
 [Anne] Szumigalski
 Ken Mitchell.

And to the side of this list, at the right hand margin, he advises himself “get remarks from each.” Presumably Kroetsch invited each of these, as well as others, to answer his question . . . via commentary or poem. Box 11, File 2 contains a handwritten, ribald invitation to Lorna. Terrence Heath sends his response, an autograph poem, in a letter dated 26 February 1976 (Kroetsch Fonds, Box 11, File 2).

It seems to me a crucial signal of the (discovered) program of the poem that Kroetsch does not use any of these invited poems, except perhaps obliquely and covertly, in the published poem. No poem, or part, by Terry Heath. No poem by Lorna. No direct response by Wiebe: the quotation from Wiebe is copied from a published article.⁶ Kroetsch once memorably asked “How do you make love in a new country? . . . How do you establish any sort of *close* relationship in a landscape—in a physical situation—whose primary characteristic is *distance*?” (1989, 73).

Maybe his omission of the most immediate poets on his horizon—the friends, the personal contacts, the students and mentorees—enacts the growing of distances. Names named but voices suppressed. The absence of Keats. The absence of the pyramids. But also, surprisingly, *the absence of collaborators* in close relationship.⁷ And, if such absence is absently unmentioned in *Seed Catalogue*, the answer to the question “how do you grow a poet?” likely resides even more with the *unintentional* poetry: in the child rhymes, jokes, admonitory mottoes, and proverbs. Poet . . . say uncle.

Binder/Twine

to tie together/a *double* or twisted thread

Maybe the slash, so much favoured by Kroetsch, and especially in this poem, is the ultimate notational expression of grammatical collaboration. Or, better, the paradoxical absent collaboration. More than a score of them appear in *Seed Catalogue*. They appear frequently, deliberately—not quite obsessively. It is Kroetsch's double hook.⁸ That is, it gives a doubled choice, a choice of balanced equivalents. Either / or. You can choose either “either” or “or.” But the form is also a hook. Because the / joins the two into a curious, novel *one*. You can accept both without choosing. Twine is a binary that is not. As Kroetsch writes in Section 4: “Everything / in between: lost” (my slash, showing line ending). The slash allows / enables / creates an expression that incorporates all the in-between within a duality. The poem proposes an unexpected collaboration that joins and embraces the between of “man / falling” and “smack // into” (44).

Kroetsch discovers semantic collaboration and extension . . . and also generates surprise. Just to take one example, the slash that appears in line 1: “We took the storm windows / off” was inserted into the typescript by hand (Kroetsch Fonds, File 4). Here is the first opening verse paragraph as published:

We took the storm windows/off
the south side of the house
and put them on the hotbed.
Then it was spring. Or, no:
then winter was ending. (29)

In the first typescript draft, the line ended with “windows” and line 2 began with “off”, so Kroetsch has deliberately extended the line to create this slightly bizarre binding. What means the term “windowsoff”? or the possible opposition of “windows” and “south side of the house.” I cannot quite posit a plausible answer to these questions. But I do think the essential twisting that makes strong twine is at work here. Twisting the reader's mind into some torment of interpretation. Seeing some connection beyond the anticipated. And surely foregrounding the necessary involvement of the reader in some refined and teasing collaboration invited and required by poet and his grammatical play.

Quite Contrary

Horseshit, my father always argued—
 horseshit was not good for gardens.
 —Kroetsch Fonds, Box 11, File 1

The first italicized “how” question Kroetsch poses in *Seed Catalogue* is “*How do you grow a gardener?*” (31) Not until the final Section 10 does he ask the foundational seeding question—and then with a multiple choice answer, and in that twisting double hook form we’ve been noting: “*How / do you grow a garden?*” (45). Then, to open a potential answer, choice (b), he repeats the question (but with no slash), preceded by the inversion “*How do you a garden grow?*”

This question invokes Kroetsch’s grandmother, Mary Hauck, of Section 4, as well as the other Mary-muses in Kroetsch’s life. Mary, Mary, quite contrary. How does your garden grow. At one level, another (shadowed) nursery rhyme again celebrates the poetry he might have forgotten was part of *home*. At another, it shifts attention to a miracle of culture—in its root sense of *tilling*—that a seed, often almost invisibly small, colourless, nondescript, will grow into an intricate plant, often large, subtly varied and bold in palette, packed with symbolic resonances. And that plant makes seeds again, usually prolifically, ad infinitum.

Seed. I have wandered with Bob in his garden while he delights in the hostas and the sedum, tells me of his regular trips to a nearby nursery. The Greek root of ecology posits the intricate, infinite inter-dependencies that make a *home*. Through the fruits of its many collaborations—the poem ends asking, not answering, maybe post-humanly, *who was left?* (46)—maybe *Seed Catalogue* finds the validity of a collaboration with the not-human. The collaboration of seed with soil and microbe, with sunlight and chlorophyll, with honey bee and badger, with earthworm and rainwater—the catalogue continues. I would argue that such an environmental dimension is crucial to the poem. Hence, the poet pays attention to the composition of fertilizers. Then withdraws from the topic. Tells us about cabbage and brome grass.

The Absence of Books

Poetry is language used with an awareness
 of the poverty of language.
 —Don McKay, Unpublished working paper. qtd. in Bringhurst 41

In its documentary impulse, in its apparently prose assertions—“Son, this is a crowbar” (38)—in its lists, *Seed Catalogue*’s most insistent theme, explicitly

and covertly, seems to be that poetry is impossible in this place. “As for the poet himself,” Kroetsch intones in Section 6, following lists of folk remedies and fencing materials, “we can find no record” (18). In a culture without books, the bookish man seems to conclude, ruefully, but under his breath, in parentheses: “(shit / we’re up against it)” (15).

Yet obviously the dominant theme is not conclusion, but starting point. The impossibility of poetry is the *seed*. And at many moments in the poem we are surprised, against the lists and documents, by the grace and strength and colour of the lyric voice Heisler has grown:

*The palimpsest of prairie
under the quick erasure
of snow, invites a flight*

Or:

Your sweet peas
climbing the staked
chicken wire,
climbing the stretched
binder twine by
the front porch
taught me the smell
of morning. (45)

Such passages, partly because they re-read the commonplace, work-a-day images of the seed catalogue, compel the reader, collaborating, to re-read the unpoetic, the apoetic, the naive poetic as something else.

Cabbage

On the opening page, the poet recalls his mother’s jocular yet exasperated chastisement:

Did you wash your ears?
you could grow cabbages
In those ears. (29)

This example, as we must already recognize—given the epigraphic excerpt describing Copenhagen Market Cabbage—this conventional warning, now, here, again, contains within it dimensions of an economy, of heritage and genetics, of global connections—and even a link to the horse (“thoroughbred”) so often standing still in this poem.

Such a passage answers the question, “how do you grow a history?” The poet hears a rote admonition from his childhood that has been repeated over

generations: the mother is becoming *her* mother. While the “you” whom a mother’s “poem” addresses is validated as a grower, but also as a metaphor-maker: you *could* grow cabbages in those ears. You *could*, by making your ears large, and receptive, by attentive listening, speak and imagine what you cannot see and touch.

Brome grass

The poem begins with cabbage. But as it moves toward Section 10, beyond home, and to airports, Japan, Germany and painting, the quoted catalogue excerpts promote seeds for grass, and morning glory, and then ultimately—with no hyperbolic description; just the price—to sweet pea. Maybe the poem is moving away from its grounding in long-lasting vegetables practical and nourishing toward more imaginary and aesthetic and spiritual nourishment.

At the beginning of Section 7, Kroetsch cites McKenzie’s description of Brome Grass (and here, for the first time, he includes the Latin binomial—another (linguistic) broadening of the scope of the poem). The description ends with the energetic if privative endorsement, printed in bold: “**Flourishes under absolute neglect**” (20). Then in Part B of this section—again he is offering multiple choice responses to the question “*How do you grow / a poet?*”—he repunctuates and reformats the phrase as:

*Flourishes.
Under absolute neglect. (41)*

Evidently, Kroetsch recognizes in Brome’s toughness an aphorism and motto for poetry and the prairie poet. They, too, are flourishing neglected. But, more crucially, he asks us to reconsider, as with cabbages and ears, the poetry we forgot to know was so immediately present in our unpoemed home.

I said earlier that *Seed Catalogue* gives permission. My students often affirm this sense of opportunity. In a course on the long poem in Canada, they will thrill to the mysteries of Anne Carson’s *Autobiography of Red*, and they will marvel at the fluency of Daphne Marlatt’s *Steveston*, but they are also intimidated. But, when they read *Seed Catalogue*, they feel: yes, I *could* be a poet; yes, I *am* a poet: yes, my world has poetry in it. And such reactions seem to hold not only for the young woman from a farm just outside Weyburn, but for the young man whose parents emigrated six years ago from the Philippines. Even in the breadth of its learning and the genius of its multiplying complexity, *Seed Catalogue* never seems removed, never

seems arrogant. Never is pretentious whatever the hell that means. Yes, you could grow poems in those ears.

So the verb to flourish becomes a noun. And it becomes a sentence unto itself, allowing, potentially, any subject to be attached to it and grow luxuriantly. Binder twine flourishes. Flourishes. The one-word line seems both to validate decoration for its own sake, and caution against fine language used merely for effect. The absence of flourishes. We recall that this subsection is the first to be headed by a flower. Flourishes, of course, shares a root with flower. It's from the Latin *florere*, to bloom.

Similarly, Kroetsch invites us to reconsider the phrase. Surely "under" is not just "beneath," although the groundedness is again relevant. "Under" in this one/line poem will also signal protection and watchfulness and tutelage. The poet is learning from neglect.

Piss-up

To my mind, the poet's most intriguing editing of his draft for *Seed Catalogue*, is his neglect of this flourishing list of slang, profanity, and expletive⁹:

Huh-uh.
Ouch.
Whew.
No shit.
Yuk.
Is that right, eh?
Cripes.
Hmmm.
Balls.
Bull.
Come on.
Goddam.
Wow.
Holy mackerel.
Sheeeyit.
No bull.
(Kroetsch Fonds, Box 11, File 1)

In the manuscript, this list was to appear in the final section, just before the unanswered excerpt from the tactile poem: *Adam and Eve got drowned / who was left?* Now, I think Kroetsch was probably wise not to keep this passage in the published poem. For one thing, retaining it would have turned the poem too far from mother, and too far from the how of gardens. But, it does provide instructive demonstration as to how far into the vernacular Kroetsch was willing to go to find flourish within neglect.

The poem recognizes poetry in the language of the farmyard (or in the muttered asides of law courts and academic meetings). As Kroetsch wrote to himself at the head of a handwritten version of this list:

sounds of working:
 but it could
 be fucking
 (Kroetsch Fonds, Box 11, File 1)

Same sound: two processes of seeding. The catalogue of expletives is a sound poem that might, in retrospect, remind the reader of the poetry that exists where the poverty of language is so foregrounded. Several instances occur in the poem, most explicitly in Section 7C, a down-the-bar dialogue ostensibly about cowboy history, and heroism. The woman's response to drunken male bluster is first "Yuh?" and then "Huh-uh" (42), before she dismisses them peremptorily. But even "huh-uh" is a poem. It's the poetry of the restricted code, the phatic communication that validates feeling and conveys warm connection. It speaks volumes in its semantic absence. Hence, when Kroetsch finishes his account of another drunken rant, the "piss-up" with Purdy, he repeats Wiebe's observation, but for very different purpose: No song can do that.

Cultivating

Wiebe's "that," differently contextualized by Kroetsch, might refer to a discovery of your own poetry. It might refer to what this poem means to the students in my classroom. At the end of Kroetsch's list of poets he wishes to incorporate in the poem (and ultimately does not), he adds "—comments by Laurie Ricou." Whatever these might have been, or are, I don't know. But I do take the unrealized personal collaboration to be part of the poem's strategy. It gives me permission to collaborate in the poem's poetry by offering these delayed comments. It's the best collaboration I know for telling me where I'm from. Be humble, it says. Don't look down on the supposedly "uncultured." Discover your own poetry.

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NOTES

- 1 With typical generosity, Kroetsch divided his residency, and leave year, between the University of Calgary, during the fall term, and the University of Lethbridge. It was in Calgary, of course, at the Glenbow Museum that he encountered the McKenzie Seeds Catalogue (1914) that inspired the poem.
- 2 I believe McKenzie Seeds has recently moved its operations to a larger, more efficient site on the outskirts of Brandon. There is some talk of turning the original building into a casino.
- 3 Some “system” exists, of course, in the traces of narrative that shape the poem. It begins in one home place, near Heisler, and ends, in section 9, with the poet’s cousins’ return to his German ancestral home place, dying in the skies above Cologne. And hence we have one form of chronology, and of growing up. Also, Kroetsch once mapped the sections of the poem as the sequence of his many muses, mostly female, from mother to Anna Weller to “Libby.” In one note he describes the form as a “series of figures moving toward a musing.” (Kroetsch Fonds, Box 11, File 1). And one might read the sequence of entries from the McKenzie catalogue as a move from vegetables to grasses and flowers, from literal, physical nourishment to more aesthetic and spiritual food.
- 4 Although “Seed Catalogue” is in the opening section, the third and last subsection of *Field Notes* is titled “Country and Western”—another pointer to Kroetsch’s affection for the down/home sentimental truths of country music’s audacious poetry. I recall trading with Bob our bemused interpretations of the complex metaphor “You’ve got sawdust on the floor of your heart” (Sneezy Waters qtd. in “Waters, Sneezy”). In his poetic sketches toward a self-portrait, the poet imagines himself “dressed as a country & western singer,” who might also adopt the name Orpheus: “he worked small bars / on the prairies, looking for what he’d lost. / He sang hurtin’ songs that made people cry.” (Kroetsch, *Too Bad* 14)
- 5 Although only a small portion of the typescript draft of the potato section (Box 11 File 1) makes it into the published *Seed Catalogue*, similar comments might be made about the other elemental and foundational plants—cabbage, bean, and brome grass—in the poem. For an essay that might be read as a rich extension of Kroetsch’s poem to the potato, see Michael Pollan 181-238.
- 6 In discussions in 2008, Dennis Cooley reminded me of the story that Kroetsch left behind all or part of the manuscript when he returned to Binghamton. In that case, solicited poems, intended to be included, might simply have been lost.
- 7 W. H. New suggested to me that the general absence of surnames implies a relinquishing of pedigree, that is an emphasis on closeness of family, rather than lineage and status.
- 8 See my comments on Kroetsch and apposition in “The Majesty of His Loyal Apposition,” more general comments on the virgule in *The Arbutus/Madrone Files* (158).
- 9 My formatting here attempts to follow Kroetsch’s redrawing of his typescript list, but it should be envisioned with several directional arrows, and holograph insertions/deletions. Significantly, Kroetsch was obviously rearranging the list in a *poem* and poetic sequence.

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