

Robert Kroetsch and Aritha van Herk on Writing & Reading Gender and Genres An Interview

Introduction

Knowing each other as creative writers, teachers, critics, and performers, and both coming from families who immigrated to western Canada to farm in Alberta near the Battle River, Robert Kroetsch and Aritha van Herk write about each other's intertextual allusions, disguises, and voices inviting us to remember other tales, expressions, and customs that extend their stories with our own. In a consistent effort to avoid confession or autobiography, they keep the personal private and the public connected to texts and contexts. They question the assumptions of master narratives while leaving *lacunae*—of what goes without saying—with the intent to test and text themselves. In answering his own question of “how do we *live* a life and *be* a writer,” Kroetsch suggests the writer has to make a bargain with him or herself.¹ Who does the writing, and who the living? Their stories implicate other stories revealing the complexity of their writing lives.

Their work emphasizes contemporary western Canadian themes and tropes of maps, geography, travel, landscape and how the men and women confront life in these physical and mythical territories. Among their tropes are animal tricksters such as the female Grizzly bear in van Herk's *The Tent Peg*, or the talking crow in Kroetsch's *What the Crow Said*, or the female pig goddesses in van Herk's *Judith*. Ready to exploit myth and magic realism, they call upon animal tricksters, cross-dressers, clowns, and female masquerades such as Deemer, shaved, dressed, and parading through town on a Greek Island in a wedding gown in Kroetsch's *The Puppeteer*. Consider also Kroetsch's passive male mad-biographer, misnamed for the female goddess,

Demeter Proudfoot who plans to write Hazard Lepage's biography in *The Studhorse Man*, or van Herk's active *picara*, Arachne, who travels through the Canadian West and North in *No Fixed Address*. Kroetsch creates Anna Dawe, the female speaker of her father's male quest story in *Badlands*, so, van Herk recognizing the powerful male tellers of tall tales from the West, and the need to keep the story going without an ending, inverts Scheherazade's storytelling through Dorcas who calls for her own end by hiring a man to kill her in *Restlessness*. Instead of pondering death, Kroetsch creates Peek, the narrator and actor in *The Man from the Creeks* who rewrites the experiences of the Northern Gold Rush outlined in Robert Service's poem "The Shooting of Dan McGrew." Peek comments: "We suffer and die, we are told. But we also suffer and live."²

Meeting in the morning for this three-way conversation, I suggested we divide the three-hour taping into different segments, and invited Robert and Aritha to respond to the questions by commenting about either's writings, or to the western prairie or gender connections in each other's work.³ The conversational themes are: writing, reading, and interpreting the Canadian West and the North; gender difference: bodies, minds, and sexualities; and reading and writing story: voices, genres, and criticism.

I. Writing, Reading, and Interpreting the Canadian West and the North

J'NAN I would like to begin this conversation on writing and reading gender, genres, and criticism with the observation that your writings and stories reflect the cultural concerns of western Canada through character disguises, narrative deceptions, and parodic humor. It seems that to transform the actual into the fictive, and to accost the cultural constraints made on gender, you often write to and from each other's standpoint, calling upon many of the same techniques: irony, metamorphosis, humor, the tall tale, the grotesque and the absurd. How have these attitudes developed between you? What are the current intellectual and critical challenges of writing, reading, and interpreting the Canadian West and the Canadian North?

Writing from the West and the North, you recognize the metaphoric power of land, space, and myth. In the 1978 article on "The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space," Kroetsch asked how to create an "erotics of space" so that the "book and the world have intercourse." Is your emphasis to move readers into a love of the actual western Canadian world through your books?

ROBERT Mine is, yes. I want people to like it.

ARITHA You are never going to escape fear of women as an erotics of space, Robert. It will always haunt your footsteps.

J'NAN What exactly is erotic about space? The unknown, the loneliness, the fantasy?

ROBERT The possibility, the endless possibilities, the desire to encounter that possibility. What do you think, Aritha?

ARITHA Do you shape space, do you see it shaping your desire?

ROBERT It's an exchange. Exchange between—the self and the landscape. I do think of landscape as physical, geographical, and geological, but it's also that landscape for me is where human beings, and what we mean by nature, interact.

J'NAN How do the world and the book have intercourse?

ROBERT I believe strongly that a book has a subject. And the problem is to find a discourse that gets that world into the book. That speaks the world.

ARITHA That's important. That speaks the world.

J'NAN Do readers grasp that van Herk's "erotics of space" narratives are acts of doing, of lovemaking, and of anticipating? How do you entice readers to see that act, or be that act, or come into that act?

ARITHA It's a difficult palimpsest because a writer writes with multiple surfaces. Like Robert, I believe that books have subjects and have narratives. They are driven by a particular trajectory even if its outcome isn't always what is expected. I'm not very fond of closure, but there are layers and levels that I want the reader to go through: the reading act is an erotic occupation as much as the writing act, because there must be a willingness to engage in subtext, the skin beneath the skin of the text, of a story, of a character not necessarily reduced to elements of fiction but to the texture of language, the contamination of one phrase with another. So that ideally, and I don't think I have achieved this very often, the reader will be participating in the kind of perplexity that you as a writer confronted when you were struggling with that text. Which I see as an erotic activity. I think perplexity is the most erotic of all of our responses.

J'NAN The concept of perplexity is important. I sense that concept in how you say things. For instance, perplexity pervades *Restlessness*.

ARITHA Well I think puzzlement should make us curious, not frustrated. Most people think of being puzzled or perplexed as being a frustrating thing. I find puzzlement intriguing. It opens a door.

J'NAN I thought when you were talking about the world as intercourse, you

were suggesting less that the world is the text, but that those in the world engage with the text sexually. Not mere sexuality but the density and archaeology of eroticism as it recites a text, a real getting under the skin.

We have been talking about how writing the land is controlled by discourse. But writing the landscape, thinking of your badlands, water, weather, animals, may be perceived or determined within local attitudes, or particular interpretations of meaning. How do you create that discourse if people have been prohibited from ever being here, ever seeing, or knowing anything about this world?

ROBERT I think you have to bring your senses to bear on the world. How you get from that to discourse is what makes us writers. Aritha uses the expression “puzzle ice.” In *Places Far from Ellesmere*, she sees it more as a puzzle than I do I guess. I don’t know if you are trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together. Are you?

ARITHA You can’t.

ROBERT No. I am rather skeptical about our ability to put the pieces together, so you need a critical method that is willing to tolerate that uncertainty. And also the landscape you look at is in no way a fixed thing. It changes by the hour, by the season. So even there you are up against a great fluid object that you are trying to perceive.

ARITHA Writing about the physical world means committing a temporary translation.

J’NAN Books are always temporal; they are written in a particular time, about a particular time, and so readers see the edges pushing against each other like the plates of the earth.

J’NAN In 1984, van Herk asserted in “Women Writers and the Prairie: Spies in an Indifferent Landscape,” that the “west is male, masculine, manly and virile.” Certainly the mythic metonymy of the cowboy in the West, continues unabated in its new transformations in film and novels. For instance, Gus Vanderhaeghe’s *The Englishman’s Boy*. Have gender transformations shifted the emphases now?

ROBERT That’s a question. They are certainly being tested by some fine writing.

ARITHA Robert, you are the one who asserted that the West is a male space.

ROBERT Consider your last novel *Restlessness*. The notion of gender is certainly up for grabs there. Who is behaving in the traditional way? I think each character is doing both, wouldn’t you say?

ARITHA I think each character wants to be as androgynous as possible, and

yet is trapped, confined by his or her own physical limitations. No matter how wide the world, you end up facing that confinement. But I'm not sure that is a function only in Calgary. The West is mythologically configured as being male, but underneath is a stratum of subversion that I see as female. And that's of course where the "Spies" paper comes from. Which was written in direct response to the famous "House/Horse" paper. Kroetsch, you still haven't actually disowned that paper.⁴

ROBERT Not really, It's there, isn't it.

J'NAN Have you found a way to be inclusive, and to avoid the binaries, such as the man/horse, woman/house, male/active, female/passive?

ROBERT I think what one has to do is keep them fluid. I think it's pretty human to think in binaries, cold and hot, up and down.

J'NAN It's pretty hard not to, isn't it? From Adam and Eve.

ROBERT Yes, If we make the binaries too rigid we get into trouble, and the West that I was criticizing had, it seemed to me, made them very rigid, especially in matters of gender. And I think that has changed enormously right now.

J'NAN What brings that about? Is it because of the fiction that we have read or because of a cultural pattern that's replicated itself through the whole twentieth century. For instance, the women's movement begun in England in the 1913s led to the franchise there, followed in the US and Canada, and back to Europe. The culture helps or hinders women's voices to gain and lose strength.

ARITHA But I'm not sure culture is tied to franchise, but to other things: an immigrant woman who comes here and who has to deal with a whole panoply of things that she never had to deal with before, or a First Nations woman who has lived here all her life face similar things. There are First Nations women alive who have literally seen an entire almost industrial revolution happening in front of their eyes. The demand has always been gendered in terms of that requirement that women accept change. And yet, at the same time there is a strange kind of expectation that women will effect change, but effect it subtly. So that if there is a binary division, which I don't subscribe to too much, I would rather endorse the middle ground, that gray area. But women in the West have gone through tremendous changes, tremendous alterations. When I look at my mother and I see the changes that took place, only in her life, I am astonished at her ability to handle transformation.

J'NAN And she was an immigrant mother.

ARITHA Very much so. So that necessity for malleability, for transformability, one minute you camouflage yourself as this, the next minute you are required to do something else is a demand made of women. Men are expected to present a certain front, rightly or wrongly, I think wrongly. So that in a sense it's as if men have been prohibited from approaching the notion of West in a subtle way. That's why they can't just disappear into the landscape. The male relationship to the West, whatever the West is, has been much more imposed than the female relationship. Robert, what do you think?

ROBERT I'm thinking around the periphery of the argument I guess. But to go back to your immigrant story. We were traveling somewhere to find a home. Which is a kind of contradiction.

ARITHA Home is where you are from, not where you are going to.

ROBERT And then the second thing is that once you are traveling, you have escaped home. You are given liberties. Whether it's the automobile or the highway, or email. Suddenly you can escape the sharp definitions, and pretend to be of the opposite sex, or whatever else.

ARITHA Pretend to be young and beautiful. Pretend to be rich.

ROBERT So getting back to my model. Getting out of the house gives you a lot of freedom.⁵

J'NAN If everyone wants out of the house, both men and women, then does the house exist anymore as a home or as a place of residence? Are we thinking now in different terms? For instance, in *Restlessness*, Dorcas was staying in a hotel. She didn't want to die at home.

ARITHA But homelessness has become her home. That picks up on what Robert is saying. That freedom is a terrible thing as well as a wonderful thing.

ROBERT I guess it goes back to the phrase *No Fixed Address*. Once you don't have a fixed address the game has changed.

ARITHA Which follows on the model of Hazard Lepage of *The Studhorse Man*. But his fixed address is his horse, isn't it?

ROBERT I think he has a longing for home.

J'NAN Home for a man is his first home and his mother.

ROBERT That's an interesting idea.

J'NAN Then no other woman actually makes a home for him?

ROBERT It's interesting watching football games where the athletes get to speak a word or two on their own, and so often say, "hi mom."

ARITHA Is that all they say?

ROBERT They don't name girlfriends or sisters or fathers. These big tough guys say, "hi mom." I mean it's amazing. A window on our culture. After smashing each other to pieces, "hi mom."

ARITHA I'm a winner today mom. There is something I was going to add. Oh, I wanted to say, do you know that Robert's first novel, which is unpublished (the manuscript is in the University of Calgary archives), is called *When Sick for Home*?

ROBERT That's right.

ARITHA I read it when I was doing the biocritical introduction to his work. It's about a priest coming home. That whole notion of celibacy is tied in as well. So it's fascinating. It's a wonderful novel, Robert. I think you should publish it.

ROBERT The title comes from Keats. When sick for home she stood in tears amid the alien corn.⁶

ARITHA Was Keats in Italy at that point?

J'NAN Shifting the discourse, what are the critical challenges for interpreting the Canadian North as opposed to the West? Does the North carry the imaginative fantasy or challenge now that the West carried in the 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s?

ROBERT It is interesting to see on April 1st, 1999 after Nunavut becomes a new territory. That will change the discourse. That new territory will change even our imagining of the place. You can't quite imagine it the same again.

ARITHA You're right about the formation of Nunavut, the eastern part of the territories changing the discourse, and how the remaining Western part can't decide what to call itself. Did you hear that funny period where they were throwing around possible names? Nunavut meaning the land, or our land, was quickly settled on by the people in the Eastern Arctic. But the Western Arctic has been suggesting names like Bob. They are working in so many Inuit languages in English and French and I think seven official Inuit languages. Their transference is unbelievable first of all, and secondly, I think that we will begin to understand that there is a pan-Northern sensibility that isn't particularly Canadian. The Inuit in Nunavut have far more to do with the Inuit from Greenland, who come and visit them and who are their cousins and who they inter-marry with, than they have to do with us. So there is a borderlessness to the North. This territory being neatly defined and named is nevertheless wildly undefined. Because we are so tied to that sense of national boundary and

division and passport control, we forget that these are people who have lived beyond boundaries.

J'NAN Right. Do the Inuit from Alaska move in and out of other countries and also share families and cultures?

ARITHA Of course they do. Always. That's an arbitrary border.

J'NAN Is it the eastern or Western Arctic that had a bear for a flag?

ARITHA That was the whole Northwest Territories.

J'NAN So, as in any cultural divide, the Inuit are arguing over who gets the bear.

ARITHA Who gets the bear. Well the bear is a powerful totem in the North. It's the most powerful creature, unafraid of anything, including man, no natural enemies. Except the weather I suppose and starvation. These are interesting ideas and they are going to have an effect on the way we read North. Most Canadians read North blindly. They read it as if they have never learned the braille. They see it as some kind of remote, inaccessible, miserable, cold, barren place. I get very frustrated with Canadians about this, that they will spend thousands of dollars to go to Las Vegas, but they will never make one flight to Resolute Bay. I know Las Vegas is warmer, but it's as if there is a deliberate curtailing of the Canadian imagination.

J'NAN Because the Canadians live so close to the 49th Parallel, do they want access to the large metropolitan cities of the United States? Do they lack or ignore the discourse of the Canadian prairie landscapes? I think the United States, in particular those on both coasts as different from large central plains, really do not see the land; they live in a material fast culture that does not include quiet, space, or inactive watching or thinking. Most have to snatch time to read. Do you appreciate how many bookstores you have and how important winter is for shifting from the body to the mind? When it's hot and warm in the United States, people drive to the beach, the mountains, the city, or the desert to keep actively busy outdoors.

ARITHA You are right about material culture and its effect on us. In some ways and this is the interesting preoccupation of Canadians, Americans are living in a conundrum, a kind of quicksand of their own cultural materialism, which simply produces the same reading. I used to feel anger about it and now I merely feel a kind of strange pity, that if all you know is McDonald's and all you search for is McDonald's, then your horizons are reduced.

J'NAN Staying with the land, culture, and gender, I am interested in finding out how you rewrite the land? For instance, considering ice, age, tundra,

geography, geology, maps, in addition to the deconstruction of the palimpsests or the paring away of the past, do you show how layers are added, padded, or redesigned? We often think of Hilda Doolittle's comments about the palimpsest, getting back inside psychologically, or getting back geologically as you talk about core values. Are you helping us to see how the materialism of the United States is a superficial layering on the twentieth-century culture? Is the conversation you were having about the peoples of the North a commentary to the peoples of the United States?

ROBERT I think Aritha suggests that most Canadians have a very naive view of the North. Consider, the word "empty" they use so often, as if the North is empty. It's like saying that space is empty. But it's full. It's not inscribed sufficiently yet. Whereas when you're traveling even in—I was just in California, in a sense it is a pretty much inscribed landscape. We are so slow. It would be fun to teach a course on some books about the North and see how they fill the landscape.

ARITHA You are right about that desire to rewrite, but stay comfortable.

ROBERT We are puzzled about how to read the North. The explorer narrative is getting more attention now.

ARITHA But I'm frustrated by the explorer narrative too. The one that gets the most attention is the Franklin narrative. The guy that goes up there is the character who tries to find the Northwest passage, an abominable failure who kills everyone. Utter failure. End of story. There is a little stone plaque in Westminster Cathedral that his wife has put up, saying "not here," "You sailed the whatever seas." But that fascination with failure, when in point of fact there were people who succeeded in living North.

ROBERT If you look at the Western story in the United States, which covered a historical period which was very short, the cattle drives, and so on, it produced this enormous mythological response, and is, in ways, the most unique story in the States.

J'NAN That Western story leads to the next discussion as it relates to travel and place. From different characters' perspective, travel, quest, exploration, and to be on the move, dominates most of your fiction. What is interesting to me in both of your recent works is that Raymond in "The Poetics of Rita Kleinhart" and Dorcas in *Restlessness* are both traveling couriers.⁷

ROBERT Yes.

J'NAN Do characters travel because everyone today is on the go, or is it that from the prairies travel was the only way they saw the culture differently?

Is travel endemic of Western Canadian fiction as opposed to state-side fiction because we were getting back to the West? Has the focus or energy of travel changed in the years since your early novels, and is it toward or away from something? These questions take you back to the question of home, leaving from home? Is it a way for a character to avoid the condition that family structure places on one's life?

ROBERT Well one answer that I entertain is that our ancestors in coming to North America learned the habit of migration. And we have never unlearned it. We can't get there. So here is Aritha whose parents literally crossed the Atlantic, and she's still writing about this, just ferociously about this journeying, journeying, journeying. Or in my own case, I think in five generations, no generation has died where it was born. That's a shocking realization.

J'NAN In your family?

ROBERT Yes. They came from Germany, my great-great grandparents, with their children, and every generation died some place else.

J'NAN Your sister died in California.

ROBERT Yes she did. It's like we can't get past that story. I think I have a deep domestic need. I can't find the narrative of it in a sense. Whereas I think the British have found a narrative of that domesticity. I mean in your fiction, Aritha, as in *No Fixed Address*, there's Tom saying Calgary's a kind of parody of domesticity.

ARITHA Well, he actually is at home. Maybe he's one of the few.

ROBERT Yes, but Arachne, the woman has become the questing hero and at the end goes off the map, so to speak. In the West it's the strange restlessness. The word restlessness is an important word.

J'NAN Do Dorcas, the ubiquitous traveling courier, or Rita Kleinhart the poet who goes to Japan, try on for their personae the manners, costumes, or attitudes of the culture? Or is travel an escape a short journey?

ROBERT I don't think they really do. That's what is kind of curious about it. They go to these places, or we go to these places, and yet we resist them at the same time. Like when I was working on *The Man from the Creeks* I did a lot of research. The number of people who took a nickname. It's just remarkable. You in a certain way escaped your name. And you would be "Red" or "Shorty" or something like this. There was this whole temporary thing. We are just going to do this and move on. I think in the West there was a sense of using up a space and moving on. Like the prairie towns, they lasted less than a hundred years. Then you go to

Europe and visit villages that have been there six hundred years.

ARITHA Their staticity is remarkable, isn't it.

ROBERT And here you go to Edberg, your home town, and—

ARITHA It's gone.

ROBERT Where is it? I mean it's so different. And that has conditioned us as writers.

ARITHA Do you think it's terror of that static narrative?

ROBERT Is it a terror? It's not just going towards something it's often going away from something, and we like to tell the story about what they were going toward.

ARITHA Exploring the as yet unexperienced story.

ROBERT It's so like *The Double Hook*. The pathos of James Potter riding out of town and then getting on his horse and riding back, it's not a good thing at all. You feel sorry for that guy. Hey you were out, man, why didn't you keep going? Whereas, in another culture you went and had an adventure and you took some new knowledge back to your community.

ARITHA And they welcomed you back.

ROBERT This for me is one of the central issues in Western Canadian writing. This utter restlessness. You've got your finger on it. The restlessness.

ARITHA But I don't have a solution.

ROBERT And even the end of *Restlessness* is just perfect. There is no way to resolve it in a certain way. You had to leave us

ARITHA in the elevator. I keep wondering, is it our terror of the story, and our desperate kind of attempts to escape it? Nevertheless we still don't resort to an in-placement. Do we?

ROBERT That's right. To make a culture you have to.

II. Gender and Differences: Bodies, Minds, and Sexualities

J'NAN We move now from place and space to the people who become fully aware of their bodies, minds, and sexualities as they inhabit this Western world. Male writers have acknowledged the impact of prairie landscape on their minds. When investing Western frontiers, they think in human terms. Does it follow that those locales shape female writers' minds also? What differences do women express in their fictions? How do their attitudes about their characters' sexual relationships and gender attitudes differ?

ARITHA I can't very neatly divide women writers. All of their gender preoccupations in their characters would be different from male writers and their characters.

J'NAN From writer to characters then. Aritha remarked in *Restlessness*, for instance, how Dorcas really was androgynous, or was interested in both genders, and in *No Fixed Address*, Robert remarked about Tom, the map maker.

ARITHA The parody of domesticity. I create Thomas, a positive male figure who is willing to be nurturing and gentle, and other people accuse him of being a parody.

ROBERT It's a parody of the traditional story. In the old notion the woman was in the castle while the man was out riding in the forest, and now here he's in the castle. And [looking out of Aritha's window toward the West] here we are surrounded by castles as we speak.

ARITHA Imaginary castles.

ROBERT But you see in *Restlessness*, Dorcas wants to be submissive in a traditional way, yet she's the very opposite, she subverts submissiveness.

ARITHA I like that.

ROBERT And the hired killer, Derek Atman, who should be the man of action, becomes submissive.

ARITHA He's her servant.

ROBERT Yes. How much farther can you go? What the hell do you want?

ARITHA "Mr. Killer." I wish I had used that phrase.

ROBERT That's why it's mind-boggling and unnerving to read. You know. It's fluid. I think we always tend to arrest these things as readers. In fact they stay fluid all the time. And now the notion of seduction, that is so central in your work, Aritha, becomes a very philosophic notion as well as an erotic notion.

ARITHA I think we deny that a lot. The human world now believes in reason and persuasion and they don't realize we live by seduction. But Robert, in *The Puppeteer*, when your Jack Deemer dresses in the wedding dress and becomes a parody of a bride figure, you do the same. When your characters become androgynous they seem to give up desire.

J'NAN But, Maggie shaves him and helps him dress so that they can go shopping. Their walk in the town becomes a public performance. It's a costume. Deemer likes acting out. It is less androgynous than cross-dressing whose actions were integral to his own nature. He differs from Thomas in *No Fixed Address* whose nature was to read and be happy with geography of maps, the Thomas Guide of Western Canada. He was introverted, finding his imagination developed in his domestic situation. Whereas Deemer has been everything but domestic. And to put on a

wedding dress is to parade. Am I misreading that?

ROBERT Oh I agree. You see I think there is really a generational gap here between the two of us, that I'm still kind of old-fashioned in my cross-dressing, or whatever.

ARITHA You only do it for fun? I mean your characters, not you.

ROBERT It's what J'nan said. He's kind of aware of parading, whereas for your characters you don't have to parade anymore, you know. It's like that thing in the *Globe and Mail* recently, the new kind of lesbian action. I bet that a generation like Daphne Marlatt's had to argue all the time about that politically. Now girls go into a bar. Should I go to bed with a woman or a man tonight? There is nothing political about it. It's the erotics of it. And you see you can use the word erotics so comfortably, whereas I still have to think, I might get into trouble for saying this word.

ARITHA You think you're going to have to go to confession for saying that word.

J'NAN Saying it isn't such a problem.

ARITHA It's acting it out?

ROBERT Yes, that's right.

J'NAN What follows.

ROBERT What follows is right. But this was an amazing essay.

ARITHA You see I'm not sure that's true because I have a lot of young women students who are bisexual, or straight or gay, and there are some heavy-duty politics going on. Some very intricate power politics. They may, as they say, just have a connection with a "fuck-buddy," but I still think there is a lot of stuff involved with dominance, submission, choice, anti-choice. To what extent do you occupy a certain territory? I don't think it's easy. The tendency on the part of some gay women who are very rigid to be enraged at women who are bisexual, trying to make them choose, is an example. That's a contemporary argument that's very much in our faces now.

ROBERT Well that's what this article was saying. That the traditional gay woman is enraged at these young women. That it isn't political for them.

In fact, one of the thrills is to go to bed with a really heavy duty—

ARITHA Heavy duty what?

ROBERT Lesbian, or political woman.

ARITHA Because then you get to argue with them, or that you get to destroy their construct?

ROBERT No, no. For the pleasure, pleasure.

ARITHA I think of sexuality as a purely argumentative force. That probably says something about my age too.

ROBERT It certainly does.

J'NAN Kroetsch emphasizes in his 1978 discourse with Diane Bessai—"Death is a Happy Ending: A Dialogue in Thirteen Parts"—that the protagonist James Potter, in Sheila Watson's novel *The Double Hook*, begins by killing his mother, and when he returns to town, he discovers his sister has burned down his house. What does this say about gender relations in prairie fiction?

ARITHA Well, in some ways I think that novel is more about matriarchy than it is about gender relations. Matriarchy as an incredibly endowed construct. Someone once said to me, to my own shock (I'm often oblivious to what my own work does), "Why do you always erase your characters' mothers?" Now, in real life, I have a very vehemently loquacious and demanding mother. So it's not as if I've had an erased or effaced mother in my life. But I notice that one of the things I've avoided in my fiction is the master narrative of matriarchy. Whereas *The Double Hook* takes it on, very head on, in a fascinating way.

ROBERT I think that today writing is still full of repression. There is a lot not said and the killing of the mother is something that doesn't seem like a nice thing to do. You can kill the father everywhere. But kill the mother!!! And yet in this culture, because it is rather matriarchical in ways, it is to kill the mother that becomes a central issue. And that's a kind of hidden narrative. And Sheila Watson touches on it there. I think there is a lot of silence in Canadian writing. One thing that I admire American writing for is the willingness to expose things.

J'NAN Take on the subject and battle with it.

ROBERT Yes, Yes. And ours is keep quiet about it. Actually, it is a kind of politeness. I mean there is something impolite about our politeness.

ARITHA It's very controlling.

ROBERT Somebody should write a homesteader story about it. The brutality, and the suffering, and the defeat, and all of these things that were part of it. There was all this conquering of the land.

J'NAN You didn't have to kill the mothers when so many died in childbirth.

ARITHA But even if they did you had to kill them even more because then they became an indelible emblem.

J'NAN So isn't this the reason that men get on horses and get out? Because women are that emblem. They represent creative power.

ARITHA I don't know if it has to do with the mother.

ROBERT In *As For Me and My House*, it's the wife.

J'NAN I was pushing the question, so I wouldn't misunderstand it.

ROBERT I'm just raising the question. The Freudian model swept the field in the twentieth century, kill your father, marry your mother. I don't think it's that simple.

J'NAN No. But matriarchy dominates over patriarchy in *The Double Hook*. Is that because James was sort of a wimp, who couldn't make up his mind?

ARITHA He was an indecisive man. Now there's a man for your quiet Canadian literature.

J'NAN He leaves town, loses all his money and then comes home.

ARITHA He went to town to buy the parrot a beer. But maybe that master narrative ties back to all these questions about restlessness and travel. Behind that is a kind of marvelous indecisiveness.

ROBERT You see, that's why I think Margaret Laurence is so interesting. Because her women travel. And remember the great anxiety when *The Diviners* came out. And then it seemed to me the anxiety was that a woman was running around getting screwed. If a man did that, that was fine. But you mean now we are going to have women doing this? And the question of the mother, that lovely, terrifying, huge woman, Princess.

ARITHA The one who eats the donuts, who is a blob at the centre of the child's universe, growing and growing, putrefying, by the end of the novel.

ROBERT That's true, what you say about Morag too. The daughter has to skim out, doesn't she?

J'NAN/ARITHA Yes.

J'NAN Robert, you're right about that. Your wonderful little essay about Margaret Laurence, where you set up the conclusion of *The Diviners* in the opening paragraph sets up the cyclical patterns of family affairs.⁸

ROBERT When we talk about gender, what dimension of gender, and that's what you J'nan said to begin with. Downtown Calgary is seen as one version of gender but there is another one in the happy home.

J'NAN Do you think, because you have known each other's work, come from the same location, and refer to each other in your writings, you are setting up an oppositional discourse with each other, that we as readers should pay attention to? In other words, do your characters reflect other characters in each other's books? For instance, I mentioned the fact that Raymond in "Rita Kleinhart" and Dorcas in *Restlessness* were both couriers; and Aritha had not thought about that.

ROBERT I think it was very important for me that there was another writer from that area because we came from blank spaces. When I read Aritha it's not that I preceded her, the book she writes precedes me at that moment, and I can think about it, and it's a dialogue, or maybe it's erotic.

ARITHA Robert, dialogue can only be with someone that you haven't had an erotic relationship with. Robert and I have a totally erotic relationship. I've written about that moment when I had held *The Studhorse Man* in my hands and was looking at the high-level bridge. It is the one moment in my life when I was given a transcendent belief in narrative and discourse, and language and place. I had never then met Robert. I didn't even think I ever would. I was a very young kid, only eighteen. But in a strange way, and I say this with complete and total gratitude, in a strange way all of the things that Robert writes inhabit me. I read his books and I know they will do things to my subconscious, my intellectual, my emotional, my psychological, my erotic thinking, that no other writer does. Most people would be terribly afraid of this, and if it were anyone but Robert Kroetsch's writing, I would be afraid. But it's as if I'm haunted, and I'm not saying this negatively. I take total pleasure in being haunted by his work. He's sitting here looking bemused now, but I need to say how much what Robert writes means to me, in ways that I can't even articulate. I had completely erased that Raymond was a courier. I always fixate on Rita, you know the vanishing woman, the one going in and out of doors.

J'NAN Robert, I'm glad you brought Rita back in the last group of poems.

ARITHA But in a strange way I do not mind my being haunted by Kroetsch. In my writing, I am having an ongoing dialogue with not just what Robert Kroetsch has written, but with what the work he has written represents. And I'm very happy with that, because in our lives if we can have meaningful conversations with even three people, we have to be grateful. Of course I have dialogues with other writers in my head, but never to this extent. Probably because of knowing that he drank from the same river that I did. That seems really silly, and I'm not being a sycophant, but it's been a marvelous, almost totally language-based relationship. We see each other, what, once a year, maybe, if we are lucky or unlucky.

ROBERT Yes—[LAUGH]

J'NAN Another question on gender blending and sexuality relates to attitudinal changes in Western culture. Certainly supporting these changes are the many books and journals whose subjects focus on the many orienta-

tions of sexuality and gender. I think it was David Lodge, in his essays on the novel, who indicated that post-modern characters are often sexually ambivalent or hermaphroditic diegetically expressing life's contradictions. Certain genre blends fit here as well. Poetry has adopted narrative. Biography supplants autobiography. Films include documentary footage, and as a collective art form, emphasize the visual and verbal language of sexuality and violence. And in your work, I notice that Rita Kleinhart is going to write a collective biography. What are the collective themes, attitudes, or *idée fixe* for the next century? Do you perceive a new dialogue, a new discourse in the making?

ROBERT Well, on top of that, I think the biological intention is to reproduce the species and somewhere in the twentieth century we got to be too good at it. So what does this do to the writing? What do you think?

ARITHA It's interesting you used the word hermaphroditic. A hermaphrodite is both male and female, and I interestingly see that as containing the seeds of your own destruction. If the discourse of the nineteenth century was religion and of the twentieth century was sexuality, it seems to me that the twenty-first century is moving more and more to a discourse of self and display, or performativity. The rise of the memoir. People write memoirs about their bloody table legs. [LAUGH] There is an incredible fascination with what we perceive as a confessional or "real" story. The complete subsidence of any notion of privacy is fascinating, but repellent to me, shocking to me, but at the same time I'm watching it as avidly as anyone else. So I don't know whether that fits very well into any kind of paradigm. It seems to me we are almost entering an age of self-consumption. And, Robert, you said once, you have to be careful that you don't appropriate your own life, to the extent where there is nothing left. We were having a conversation about appropriation of voice, and how, if you steal someone else's story, you have to be responsible for that act. But more important is what you said about stealing your own story, to the extent there is nothing left. I am terrified of self-appropriation, because the one thing that I adamantly think enables us to continue as intellectual thinking beings is a *sense of privacy*, and when people lose that, then what is left?

J'NAN I like the word "privacy" which denies collective control. You speak about the introversion of writer and the source of the imaginative realm. You transcend that background. I ask where is the culture going? So privacy is a good word.

ROBERT It's a great word. You see I was at a conference where a modern thinker said, "privacy as we know it is over." You go shopping and somebody is making a record of where you live and what you buy, and so on. And even the Clinton story, if it were to be read on another level, say privacy, forget it. This is going to change fiction somehow or another. I'm so profoundly schooled in privacy that I'm slightly neurotic on the subject, I guess, and Aritha, I think you are too in a certain way. I really feel old-fashioned sometimes. I can't go into this confessional stuff. I just can't believe it in a certain way. Now people film themselves making love and then they circulate this, and so on. But again, I keep going back to *Restlessness*. But that does investigate privacy in a certain way. I mean that's wonderful the heroine sees herself, or the other woman, or whatever.

ARITHA Nobody knows who is watching whom anymore. That's deeply disturbing to me. I feel terribly old-fashioned, but the confessional mode, which appears to be the way that we are launching ourselves into the year 2000, is almost catastrophically an imposter. That we believe now we are seeing people's real emotions or whatever in constructs.

J'NAN I'm just trying to find the discourse that we are going to use.

ROBERT I look forward to reading what you write, because it—what do you call it when you take pictures—is more powerful than the word in a certain way?

ARITHA The image?

J'NAN Icon. Visual iconography has been a dominant influence in the twentieth century. I think of the film *Rear Window* when you, Aritha, wrote about Dorcas looking across the courtyard into another hotel window and saw her alter image. The self, the anti-self, or the alter ego.

ARITHA We gave to art, whatever art is, the confessional power, in the twentieth century, and now it seems that something else has happened. Confessional power has gone elsewhere. I don't know if it's gone into spectacle, or if it's gone into a peculiar version of performativity, which I don't really understand, or if it's shifted elsewhere. But it's no longer in the same zone as an art.

J'NAN Are you speaking about your own performative works?

ARITHA Oh, it never occurred to me. The performative works I do are total inventions. [LAUGH]

J'NAN Performance reminds me of *Paris is Burning*, a documentary film about black gay men in New York, who live in community groups they

call families preparing each year for their Harlem dress ball.

ARITHA I know the movie you mean.

J'NAN So performative is creational. These men identify with their matriarchal houses. Each house has a strong, demanding, male mother. If we are going into spectacle or performance, how does that relate to confession?

ARITHA I don't have an answer. I'm completely perplexed.

ROBERT Okay, I think it's Foucault who says that the confession had a set of rules. Did you dishonour your mother, did you swear, whatever. And now, if there are rules, they are not that clear. Like this woman who photo-graphs herself—I haven't seen it—on the web every fifteen minutes, no matter what she's doing, as if that's the truth, you know. Or, the guy in Iowa who tries to keep a journal of his whole life, trying to write down everything.

J'NAN Well, he is very much like Sartre's character, the autodidact, who instead of writing was reading all the books sequentially through the alphabet in the library in *Nausea*.

ARITHA He's so busy writing things down that he has no time to live. You know this idea, this talking of privacy, is fascinating. I've got to write something about it.

ROBERT It just bugs me. And of course then why the hell did we become writers if we wanted to be so private.

ARITHA That's why you become a writer. Because you can be more private by the public enactment of discourse than if you have to live a seemingly transparent life. We have personae. We have friends. We have costumes. We have performances. We have characters.

J'NAN Let's return to this section's concluding question about the discourse for the next century. Is there a fear factor? Are people normally fearful? Is it the Hobbesian world: "nasty, brutish, and short"? In the final section, we will be talking about death and desire. It seems to me that by coming to the end of a century, to live over the century, people have greater anxiety, than just going from 1990 to 1991, or 1900 to 1901. Somehow at the end of a century there is a greater fear of what comes next. If fear is a component, then privacy is a real issue, because I can remember when May Sarton was writing about the fact that she lived alone up in Maine, and she worried about dying and not being found.

ARITHA And she didn't think that would be a happy occasion?

J'NAN She remarked about leaving her animals—and their needing to be fed. I don't think she was worried about dying, per se, but dying alone.

How is aloneness different? Do private individuals prefer to be alone?

ROBERT There is this other side. I was in Berlin last fall. Somebody told me that 76% of the households, in Berlin, are single adults. Now there could be a child I suppose. Seventy-six percent equals three adults out of every four. So against the notion of our fear of privacy, or maybe because of something we have created, this kind of situation where we are each in a little cubicle. And then we have e-mail, so we don't even have to go outside.

ARITHA This whole 2000 focus seems to me to be one of those flash points—people always look for something that will take the electrical charge, and so they've chosen the turnover of the millennium to be a flashpoint. Maybe that's why people are confessing so much.

ROBERT But it is sort of mythological. At the end of the world we might be too sophisticated to think about it. But somewhere it is operating somewhere, something.

J'NAN I remember my grandmother, who was elderly when I was a little girl, often referred to the Bible's writings about what was going to happen after the end of the world. It seemed to me then that it was too important to her. Now, I see it was integral to her view of the world. It was, in Aritha's language, her flashpoint.

ARITHA But also fraught. Because that apocalyptic narrative can turn on you. You the reader and you the writer. Both the readerly and the writerly parts of that narrative can turn.

ROBERT I notice that love stories are often told after the event, so you get a certain kind of emotion of anger and loss or something. Whereas, if you could record it while it was happening, there would be some great highs.

ARITHA [LAUGH] Could you sustain them narratively?

ROBERT Yes, you can.

ARITHA Is it possible to write love stories anymore, Robert?

ROBERT Well, I think so. I made a public statement that I didn't think so, but I think so. The popularity of these things. A deep longing for them.

J'NAN Are love experiences—stories, fables, fantasies—the oppositional contrast of privacy? In other words, if 76% of the Berliners live alone, then is there a craving for a confessional, private communion with another?

ROBERT Yes. I give just this one example. There was a couple in church, a man and woman, and it took me a while to figure out they didn't live together, but they were regular, they were a couple. They were going to Cuba for two weeks. They were going to be together. I thought, how strange.

Here you are in romantic Berlin or whatever it is, and for them, let's do something strange, let's go live together for two weeks in Cuba. [LAUGH]

ARITHA But it makes total sense to me. That people would live—I actually think we don't yearn for coupledness, I think we yearn for aloneness, and are acting it out. And if they really want to be connected in a living arrangement, let's say, they would be living with someone else, but if 76% of them are living alone I think they are doing so by choice.

J'NAN I agree. I know colleagues who work together every day, but live alone in separate homes. They always vacation together, and everyone considers them a couple, as they always come and go together.

ROBERT I kind of like this idea.

III. Reading and Writing Story: Voices, Genres, and Criticism

J'NAN Both of you emphasize the importance of writing and reading as critics and storytellers. Your essays are stories in that the form often leads the reader as in a maze to find the way in or the way out. I'm thinking of *A Frozen Tongue*, *Invisible Ink*, *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, and *Labyrinth of Voices*.⁹ Are you creating a double self: a person who writes watching that person write? Who are these many creative "selves?" And I use the word "selves" in quotation marks.

ROBERT On a very simple level, it seems to me a writer has to think about writing. Then, you discover this is not a very popular notion with a lot of writers. They don't believe this. It gives me pleasure to think about writing. I like writing essays. That's the first part of the answer. What do you think?

ARITHA It's not just thinking about writing, but about reading. For me, writing is a continuum of what I do more than anything else. I am a reader. I am obsessed with reading. I have always been obsessed with reading. I suspect it's actually a physically comforting act for me to follow words in a page. Because I'm not hunting for meanings so much. Sometimes it's just reading for the pleasure of the action.

ROBERT But many of your essays are delivered publicly first, I believe. And having seen you a few times, there is a great sense of performance.

ARITHA It seems to me it is all tied in some way to reading. And you're right, if you are a writer, you think about writing. My way of thinking about reading is to write, and my way of thinking about writing is to read. My essays come out of that. You're like an evangelist. You go up to someone and say, I've read this great book. [LAUGHING] So every one of my performances is about the act of reading. The essays, too, are ways of

reading; I don't think it's a passive single activity, or an easily delineated activity. I think it's one of the most complicated things that humans do, to make signs that other people attach meaning to. So, it isn't any surprise that one would then write essays about one's writing and reading. For me, there's a bridge between the two. But that's my reading self.

ROBERT Yes, that's interesting. Yes.

ARITHA Writing the "Ficto-criticisms."

J'NAN Robert, do you think you consciously write inside or outside the dominant discourse? The dominant critical discourse? Do you resent being called Mr. Postmodern?

ROBERT I think of myself as writing outside. I think that's where I give myself identity in a certain way. So when I get co-opted I'm a little surprised. You, Aritha, must think of yourself as radically outside sometimes?

ARITHA Except that I'm functioning within an institution that's totally inside. When people start saying to me, well you're the senior professor in this, I am appalled, but of course it's true. You are inevitably co-opted by the very structures that you resist.

J'NAN We all have to live within some kinds of structures if we are in the publicly employed world.

ARITHA [LAUGHING] That dominant discourse is going to get you. I think it's there as an open field. You can choose to make your footprints across it or you can sort of skirt it, look at it, measure it, take it on. It's daunting.

ROBERT There's another thing, I find that I get ideas out of essays, reading essays and writing essays, that it feeds my other writing. Because some people see it as a contradiction. For you, they must be very close.

ARITHA We live in this world where everything enfolds with everything else. I know for some of my students it seems like an impenetrable labyrinth. But instead of being in there and trying to find your way out, I think it's more fun to say, oh let's see where this little turn of the hedge will take us. [LAUGHS]

ROBERT That's why I think your resistance to genre fits, it fits you in many ways, it announces you. I mean, *Restlessness* as a kind of travel book in several ways; it is fascinating that you put these two forms together.

ARITHA I'm interested in questing motions. But then you go back to, who was it, Blanchot, who said every book is its own genre?

J'NAN We've touched on a number of the generic forms in the first two sections. We talked about confession, travel, explorer narratives, place, love

stories, essays, “ficto-criticism,” and master narratives. Is the narrator in any of your books questioning the idea of being a writer? In other words, do you use the persona of the writer in your work, and do you think the contemporary writer could write master narratives or “giant fiction,” after Aritha toyed with Tolstoy in *Places Far From Ellesmere*?

ARITHA I think Robert’s done it more interestingly than I have with the two writers in *Alibi* who are there to take over the spa and to announce truth in the darkness of the cave. They were thrown out for being the impostors they are.

ROBERT What about the Tolstoyan possibility? Do you do it in?

ARITHA I don’t think I do it in, or I want to do it in, in *Ellesmere*. I want to read. Again, I see that book as a reading act. I want to read against the notion of this giant man, who, still, for all the time that’s past, is a kind of image in Russian literature and to us looking at Russian literature from the outside. Tolstoy appears to have set a version of benchmark. It’s not that I want to do him, or his reputation as the giant figure, in, but I want to unread what he’s written. Through the text, I’m emotionally involved with him and I’m angry with what I feel he did to his character, which I think subverted his own writerly ability. That he creates this fascinating woman and he says, holy shit, I don’t know what to do with her. So I have only one choice. Not that I’m suggesting he should have let Anna Karenina live happily ever after. Those two binaries aren’t very good ones. But he seems unwilling to grapple with the force of his imagination, and it strikes me that every time you get a writer who is convinced of the stature of his or her imagination, then you get a problematic text as well.

J’NAN He certainly was a problematic man. We go back to matriarchy, mothers, and wives. He had a problem with gender that was pretty deep.

ROBERT I agree with what Bakhtin said about Dostoevsky, that you should let your characters have a lot of freedom. That sounds impossible in a way, but it’s true, and they can push you around. If you think of Shakespeare, I mean, *King Lear* is in some ways bigger than Shakespeare, let’s face it. Why not have these characters? I think Tolstoy was afraid of that, and that’s why you say he curtails his imagination when he comes to this woman who is just too big for what he’s willing to think about. Gender. That’s why we like traces of the writer in the book.

ARITHA Liebhaber taking apart the alphabet in *What the Crow Said*. And the alphabet reforming despite his best resistance. My students are so puzzled by Liebhaber.

ROBERT He wants to put it together.

ARITHA *What the Crow Said* is a wonderful book to teach. Students are completely puzzled because they can't even imagine the idea of print not being available to them, so that they start questioning what Gutenberg really did to the world, and to Liebhaber. He's a great writer/figure, making things fit.

J'NAN I'm concerned about reading. In *Death is a Happy Ending*, Kroetsch remarks that critics are fearful of the writers' words because they are not able to allow the "work of art" to become an "enabling act" to play out the possibility of "meaning." If I read Robert correctly, critics as readers are fearful of the writers' words.

ROBERT Critics as readers?

J'NAN Or readers who are not critics.

ROBERT Critics as readers have more of a vested interest than do plain ordinary readers. And that can be good or bad. They might really be investigating something or they might be—

J'NAN Imposing it on you.

ROBERT Yes. But I feel strongly that criticism is really an extension of the text. I feel very strongly about that. So is teaching.

J'NAN Is extension an addition to the text? Is it a misreading? That is why I was asking the question of adding to instead of uncovering. I think both of you are extending readers' knowledge of the prairie. Aritha, you add to Tolstoy's inability to deal with that "fully fleshed woman." In other words, I'm seeing Robert's "enabling act" and "meaning" as accretive.

ROBERT That's a nice thought. I mean, the Palliser Hotel cannot be the same hotel again. Writing changes the world in that sense in one of the most remarkable ways.

J'NAN I like the word you use in that essay as an "enabling act." Because I think that's really the source and the meaning.

ROBERT Yes.

ARITHA Robert also said that "criticism is the story of how we read." I have used that so much because people say to me, what is this "ficto-criticism?" Why are you making a fiction out of what is criticism?

ROBERT It's the story of how you read.

ARITHA It's your line, and so it makes total sense to me that what I would do in "ficto-criticism" is write a parallel story. Because criticism is the story of how we read. Whatever heavy theories are brought to bear, they are all acts of reading which goes back to my desperate and neurotic attachment to reading.

ROBERT Though it's interesting how often a person I meet will say, I wrote a paper on your work.

ARITHA So now what do you say?

ROBERT They were compelled to write, they had to engage differently. They often say, in not too friendly a fashion, that they had to write. The critic becomes writer. It's complicity, it's sharing pleasure, it's erotics. That's erotics. You know that great thing in the *Divine* comedy, the great lovers, Paolo and Francesca, are looking at a text together.¹⁰ Once you look at a text together, you're making love. In a certain way you are into erotics. And if you wrote a paper on this thing you might hate that bastard but you would be pretty close to him.

ARITHA You've been in bed with the book.

ROBERT That's right.

ARITHA At least with the book they've written a paper on—

ROBERT They often do it, put it that way.

ARITHA Writing a paper on you, not on Francesco and Paola.

ROBERT And then I want to say, you certainly did write it on me!!

ARITHA In indelible ink.

J'NAN Do you feel you have a similar approach to criticism or critics reading your writings? For instance, Aritha, you write a lot about your own work, as if the critics are not reading very clearly. You comment on your first three novels in *A Frozen Tongue*, and you've done it on *Places Far from Ellesmere*, and "The Map's Temptation or the Search for a Secret Book."

ARITHA Oh I don't think that's because I think readers aren't reading it properly. It's that when you go back and reread your own text you see it in a different way, and so sometimes you want to talk with that text again. It isn't a corrective to critics. There are things there that I discover, that I'm both appalled and delighted by, and so I feel I have to continue the conversation with the text.

J'NAN And Robert, you do that in your poetry?

ROBERT Yes, I was thinking of that. I think that's another strategy. I don't think anybody's misreading. It's just another way to keep talking.

J'NAN But it's brilliant. This is different from earlier periods. Keats and Hart Crane wrote lots of letters full of theory about their texts and writerly stances. It is important for us to articulate how your critical texts come into your art, so readers will come to understand to read it all.

ROBERT Our stuff is very much of a piece. We do tend to write a single whatever. Unlike a journalist who might just jump around and do this

and that. I look at your [Aritha's] new book and say, that's in a tapestry that goes back to other books.

ARITHA Books talk to one another. Even though I may feel a hundred years removed from *Judith*, I see sudden elements of her coming back. Then I think one wants to explore. If there is any kind of model, you think of Borges endlessly revising his stories. Which is the definitive edition? Then you get all these translations and some are better than others, and some are execrable. Within the fictions there is all this talk about fiction, and maybe we are caught in a kind of sticky molasses or labyrinth. Let's face it, language and discourse and writing and words are what we live and breathe. There is nothing else. So, it shouldn't be a surprise that it ends up being in dialogue with itself at times.

ROBERT In a certain way the author's name is merely the name attached to this total mass.

J'NAN Is re-inscribing, or writing over a way to avoid the concept of death? Is it playing the Phoenix coming out of the ashes when you've finished the book? Later you reread it and comment upon your earlier writings. Does that act enable you to develop a cycle as did William Faulkner in Yawknapatapha County, Margaret Laurence in Manawaka, and you, Robert, in the Notiweekin Trilogy.

ROBERT I'm not interested in the notion that when you look at a block of stone you see a form in it. I want to say, here's a piece or block of stone; if I put this on here, that's interesting. You add whatever they call collage in sculpture. For that reason I like what a culture might call junk. Because often these pieces are made of car bodies, or things that are going to perish, like half a beef, or something like that. That intrigues me. The whole notion that there is some ideal form in that block of stone is—

J'NAN Too Platonic?

ROBERT Yes, too Platonic. It would never make me start chiseling.

ARITHA I see the form. I don't have to do it.

J'NAN That is why you said earlier that you have to come to some focus of what it is that right now is gnawing at you, if you are going to write.

ROBERT And that's why you have to be surprised by the world all the time. Like you think, yes, that's a good idea. I think I'll put that in. Look at the colour red on that. Something like that. It's a *very* different view of the artist. Now that goes back to your question of what comes about in the twentieth century.

ARITHA Do you think we are going to be more willing to apprehend the

perishable when you claim your interest in junk?

ROBERT I started to say that, and then I start to wonder about that. In a certain way postmodern is a willingness to say everything is useful. I mean how long will that last? I can see a very stringent version of art developing.

J'NAN Which is sterile?

ROBERT That's right. Margaret Laurence, when she says, "you go to the nuisance grounds." I said that's where you go.

J'NAN That's where you find the garbage. That's why I referred to the Phoenix image.

ROBERT Sure, that I agree with.

J'NAN Would you discuss your comic writings about life and death? Are the ways you use pronouns keys to this deconstruction? In "Gazing at Coffins: A Meditation on Erectile Death, for Robert Kroetsch," van Herk refers to Kroetsch's persona, "I am, today, my own widow" from his *Completed Field Notes*, by suggesting that in his "grotesquely comic universe" desire is a "seeking toward death" because the "fearfulness of desire" "is subsumed into a lust for desire's opposite . . . death itself." These are quotes. And so I think, reading that, I see in it the larger picture of accretion or adding to rather than deconstruction. In that sense, both of you appear to be moving into the next century by taking on death. And Aritha said to me after the night of the reception for *Restlessness*, "I didn't kill her. I haven't killed anyone yet."

ARITHA It's actually true. I don't think I have killed anyone.

J'NAN So, are the binaries of life and death the paramount issue for the next century?

ROBERT *Restlessness* veers toward a number of things we have been talking about—privacy, death. And then privacy going all the way to a subtle form of suicide. And the question of discourse is in the book. The resort to travel discourse fascinates me. Because we have learned to talk about our world's plan. Gee, I'd like to go to Las Vegas or, wouldn't it be nice to go to Mexico for a week. We don't know what the hell we mean by that, but we are stating something that we can't name. You're probably going to get diarrhoea in Mexico, let's face it.

ARITHA Tourista par excellence.

ROBERT To do it with hotel rooms staggers me, because God knows, I have been in enough hotel rooms and it never crossed my mind to make a note about them.

ARITHA But you've written a wonderful scene where the hot and cold taps are reversed in the Banff Springs Hotel.

ROBERT I did once, didn't I. But they were. I scalded myself. [LAUGHING]
I've got scars to prove it.

ARITHA When I wrote that essay "Gazing at Coffins: A Meditation on Erectile Death, for Robert Kroetsch," I know that in Robert's novels many of his characters are only able to achieve erection when they are in a coffin, or close to death, or intimate with a life-threatening situation.

ROBERT That's the Phoenix.

ARITHA People read that as a negative comment. But I see that as a tremendously positive one. Because it seems to me that it is that willingness to tread the edge that makes this fiction so important for us.

ROBERT That's why I think we have to turn to the comic that's less than programmatic. Tragic is so programmatic, in a certain way.

J'NAN One gets to the tragic halfway through the comic. These comments take us back to our asking, can you write a love story? Romance is a part of the comic, and a part of a love story.

ARITHA Are you tempted by a love story, Robert?

J'NAN He mentioned Paola and Francesca, the great lovers.

ROBERT I don't think I can really write what most people would call a "love story." Though I've been infatuated, God knows. I'm quite capable of getting there myself. Maybe it's a problem of discourse in a way. I can't quite believe the discourse.

ARITHA I'm asking because I'm trying to finish a love story now, and I'm having a terrible time with it. And I can't think of it as anything but a love story. It's many other things. But you're always working on the periphery because that central narrative itself is so imbued with a tinge of—nostalgia.

ROBERT The great love stories that I like are things like *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*. But I can't begin to write like that.

ARITHA But you don't think the love story in *What the Crow Said* between Tiddy and Liebhaber is a great love story?

ROBERT I think it's a love story. Yes. But it's not what the world is talking about as romance.

ARITHA A love story and romance are not the same thing. [LAUGHING] The line where Tiddy says to Liebhaber, "you look tired, get into bed." And the priest is desperate to marry them so he can preach a sermon. He needs an excuse to preach a sermon. So I say to the students, "look at this pick-up line." They understand that language better than, "look at the cumulation of this love story." They are appalled, [LAUGHING] I mean

they want some elaborate, Byzantine construction. When that's exactly what Tiddy says to Liebhaber, "you look tired, get into bed."

ROBERT They don't talk about their own lives, in some way.

ARITHA No.

ROBERT I'm appalled at how they go about getting into bed.

ARITHA That's a wonderful contrast. [LAUGHING]

J'NAN Please talk about the importance of pronoun voices in your recent work, *Places Far from Ellesmere*. The "I" has been replaced with a "you" and that "you" talks intimately and expressively with Anna Karenina, as if both are there simultaneously. The two women, past and present, full-bodied and sexual, dominate. Are you creating a double self: a person who writes about a "you," in which the writer reads what the person "you" thinks?

ARITHA I'm not certain if that address worked. I'm sometimes skeptical of the end result of that text. But I began with the notion of the accusatory, the second person as accusation. In a sense it's a transpired first person. We are really talking about the "I." So the pronoun is elided in a strange way. At the same time I was trying to make it seductive, inclusive. To pull the reading reader into the text, and to talk to the persona in the novel, in the "Geografictione," Anna Karenina, and the person who is trying to find her. Again, a search or a question novel, I suppose. Trying to find her, and at the same time trying to release her from the confines of the pages of Tolstoy's text. So I go back and I look at *Ellesmere*, and some sections I think work and others don't. But certainly, I do question pronouns.

The ubiquitous presence of "I" and the way that most people are so wrapped up in their own experiences, goes back to the confessional notion. There are those who must use that pronoun every time they open their mouths, which becomes a tyranny. Which is why I like having conversations with Robert, because he always either says "you" or he starts talking about what someone else has done. He very seldom talks about "I." The "I" isn't standing up there demanding attention, which is very unusual. So I guess I wanted to get away from the "I" because I was terrified of its tyranny of writing a version of autobiography which refuses to be autobiography. But that also, interestingly enough, shoved me directly toward the first person in *Restlessness*. Because I thought, well, that she'd better take responsibility for what she is telling, if not doing.

ROBERT I like the way you come to "you" in *Places Far From Ellesmere*. I must say I would have to defend the book *Places* against your doubts.

J'NAN Yes, following from the European romance languages, I read the speaker as "tu" instead of "you." I didn't read it in the accusatory way. I read it in an intimate way.

ARITHA Yes, the intimate "you."

J'NAN In *A Likely Story*, while there are dialogues between men, the dominant feeling I get from the book are the different aged male speakers' relationships, or "what I found when he" (13) remembered women, Jewel, his teacher's red hair, his Aunt Rose, the motherly shoulder he fell asleep on in the plane, Aritha van Herk, My Dead Sister, Margaret Laurence, and Rita Kleinhardt.

ROBERT Well, [LAUGHING] I've been found out.

ARITHA What, that you love women?

ROBERT Just you, Aritha.

J'NAN It seems important to reintroduce this issue of "you" and gender, because it permeates your work, and I know that the autobiographical contexts, "Trouble your Disguises." Is the "I" a greater obstacle or more problematic for writers or for readers, and why?

ROBERT Wow! That's a good question again. Well, for me it's very problematic. I take it from what you said, Aritha, it's very problematic. Just to take the most common phrase on earth, "I love you." If you think about it, you just about go mad. Is it a discourse phrase, totally separate from us? Am I saying, "hey look at me, I love you?" Is the "you" the object? If I say I'm hungry I have a pretty good idea of what I mean. But if I say "I love you," I've ventured into a discourse territory.

ARITHA I think it's the love that's the object.

ROBERT Yes, but even there, I'm sure we all use it, because if you say something more elaborate, you sound so phony. It's like, "oh, come off it man." [LAUGH]

J'NAN Well if you say "I love my dog," it's no problem. It is a construct that embraces the two pronouns, with love in the middle, and who is the "you" and who is the "I?"

ROBERT It's

ARITHA reciprocal.

ROBERT A kind of an equation. It announces an equation, which might not be mathematically reciprocal.

J'NAN Say you have a character, you're writing a love story, and the character says "I love you," how is that a problem for the reader now instead of just the writer? You've come to the realization you have to say this. I

mean, in *What the Crow Said*, Tiddy says “you look tired, get into bed.”

ARITHA She never says “I love you.” She says “it’s snowing,” “someone must take a wife.” I like that passive voice, “someone must do this.”

J’NAN So he’s recognized how problematic it is. Kroetsch makes it obvious.

ROBERT As I’ve heard too often, “don’t say that to me.”

J’NAN So is “I love you” a trivial statement when it winds up in a text.

ROBERT No. The opposite side is that in discourse we are initially believers.

I think that’s one of the fascinating things about narrating. If somebody says “the sky is green this morning,” I say, okay the sky is green. I might later think, mm, green sky. But at first I believe it. And if the character says “I love you” I believe it, and then I think, but look what he’s doing. One of the powers of discourse is that immediate acceptance, and that’s why we get away with blue murder as writers. I think Fitzgerald said that, you know, you can skate over some pretty thin ice. Like I’m an innocent reader first of all. I read, and I believe what I read, and I go along.

J’NAN And you cry.

ARITHA Yes.

ROBERT Yes. And then later on I think, oh well that was about, I notice this was about Plato or something.

ARITHA Yes.

ROBERT That the most sophisticated reader, first of all believes—

ARITHA Is incredible.

J’NAN How would you compare and/or explain how you entice the critic to start reading the story to uncover a critical position? Is your use of irony, really a new phenomenon? For example, in a recent interview with Karin Beeler, van Herk remarked about how criticism is “only now starting to talk about itself, and it’s becoming very, very insular. For a writer (who writes criticism, fiction, or poetry, as both of you do), there is always the sense of uneasiness about anything that talks only about itself, and so I thought, this is really an interesting technique. Maybe we can use this in literary criticism; we can start moving back and forth” (82).

ARITHA Which goes back to my fascination of ficto-criticism. It’s true that criticism is now so obsessed with theory, so obsessed with itself, that it will only theorize about theory. The text has become a kind of *L’etranger*, an outsider occasionally brought in to support the doorjamb.

It does speak though, to reading back to your own text. It’s true that close reading dominated criticism for the modern period. A long time. So we have, I think not, loosed the shackles of close reading completely. But

at the same time the opposite, the theorizing over theory, which seems to be almost anathema to close reading of the text, becomes another arena that is probably just as questionable. And that's why I'm interested in being an interloper between those two.

ROBERT I guess one of the quibbles would be this very occasion. This is a different kind of activity than the one where the reader or critic sits in splendid solitude looking at a text and consulting a few dictionaries for some rather glib etymologies. I distrust etymologies. But here we are doing something entirely different. You and I are being critics here. In some ways we are being creative. You're [Aritha] being a story maker. You construct a very elaborate narrative here, which we believed all the way.

ARITHA What we've accompanied with perfect assistance.

ROBERT And enjoyed it.

J'NAN And with that I'll bring us to our last question. Are you parodically playing with literary canons? By naming and acknowledging the value of past or present writers, do you establish yourself in a league with other writers?

ROBERT I just wanted to say, these have been incredibly penetrating, good questions.

Because that's a tough question how one uses the past. I sometimes think of a parallel and take it out. Because I don't like it. It's a kind of distraction for the reader. But yet I've been thinking about it. There's another kind of writing that just loads them all in, and you think, "Come on, I've read, for God's sake. . . ." I don't know about how parodic it is. What would you say [Aritha] it is? You know, you engage with all these texts in some way.

J'NAN Is thinking a better word?

ROBERT Yes. In *Ellesmere*, Aritha demonstrates an enormous respect for Tolstoy. Maybe less for Rudy Wiebe.

ARITHA Oh poor Rudy.

J'NAN Is that because few want to read Tolstoy.

ROBERT Yes, exactly. Because she doesn't like the relationship that Wiebe was establishing with Tolstoy. Whereas, she can establish one which is much more disrespectful, on a certain level. But on another, acknowledges, that this man created a character that I have to write a whole bloody book to deal with.

ARITHA That's true, absolutely.

ROBERT That's what I think one of the things about Aritha and me is, we do

talk to each other. We might not specifically. We are dialoguing on that level. So you want suicide. I'll give a suicide.

ARITHA Don't you dare. I wouldn't call my method parody so much as, and maybe this is a bad metaphor to use, tribal memory. You know you've read all of this. You know all of the stories that have been told. You're free to play with them within the construct, and you talk back and forth to the other storytellers, or jesters, or whatever figures you make audience.

ROBERT It's very much like people at the kitchen table. When somebody tells a story, that reminds me. You've got to make it pretty good, because they've just told a pretty good story. You might have to lie a little.

ARITHA And the kitchen table is that locus of where you meet, where you talk, where you remember, and where you, I think, plan the future. It isn't only about the past. It's also about the future.

ROBERT An enormous exchange goes on there. I listen to my family sometimes. The amount of exchange of ideas, stories, opinions, attitudes. All of this being exchanged.

J'NAN This is what is so sad to me, about the fact that so many people live alone. I remember as a child growing up listening to stories and telling stories. When I came home from school, I'd ramble on and on and on to my mother who probably was surfeited with my talk. This is how we actually grow and develop, through story. Story is the most important part of our life.

ROBERT I agree. Let's stop right there. I really think that is finally the way we relate to ourselves and to the world. Is with story. For all the fancy things, I'm going to go back and say, "Wow, did I have a good interview this morning. The three of us just sat there and told stories."

ARITHA And told stories!

ROBERT I have to run.

NOTES

1 Robert Kroetsch, Reading at the University of Calgary, March 16, 1999.

2 Kroetsch, *The Man from the Creeks* 299.

3 This interview occurred on March 15, 1999 at Aritha van Herk's home in Calgary. I wish to thank the Humanities Institute of the University of Calgary, where I was a senior research Fulbright scholar for 1998-1999, for the transcription of the tapes.

4 van Herk's "Women Writers and the Prairie: Spies in an Indifferent Landscape," was written in response to Kroetsch's "The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space."

5 Here, Kroetsch refers to his article "The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction" when he

- suggests the book about the West "is written as much from fear as from love. The love of woman that traditionally shaped the novel . . . is violently rivalled by a fear of woman as the figure who contains the space, who speaks the silence. And the resultant tension determines the 'grammar' of the Western novel. The basic grammatical pair in the storyline (the energy line) of prairie fiction is house: horse. To be *on* a horse is to move: motion into distance. To be *in* house is to be fixed: a centring unto stasis. Horse is masculine. House is feminine. Horse: house. Masculine: feminine. On: in. Motion: stasis. A woman ain't supposed to move. Pleasure: duty" (75-76).
- 6 John Keats "Ode to a Nightingale."
 - 7 "The Poetics of Rita Kleinhart" is a chapter in *A Likely Story: The Writing Life* 171-216. See also part I, part II in *Prairie Fire* 17.2 (Summer 1996): 28-31; "The Poetics of Rita Kleinhart," *West Coast Line: A Journal of Contemporary Writing and Criticism* 10 (27/1) (Spring 1993): 34-39; and "The Poetics of Rita Kleinhart," *Open Letter* 9th ser. no. 2 (1995): 61-74.
 - 8 "Sitting Down to Write: Margaret Laurence and the Discourse of Morning," *A Likely Story* 148-56.
 - 9 van Herk's essays are included in *A Frozen Tongue* and *Invisible Ink*, while Kroetsch participated in the discourse of *Labyrinth of Voices* and his essays are included in *The Lovely Treachery of Words*.
 - 10 Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*. Paolo and Francesca are located in Circle 2 of the Inferno. "The fatal affair of Paolo and Francesca, whose telling by Francesca causes the pilgrim to swoon, is portrayed in the joined couple." Blake's engraving of "The Circle of the Lustful: Paolo and Francesca (1824) includes the couple "above the figure of Virgil, a luminous sketch of the tender embrace that was provoked by the couple's reading of the romance of Lancelot and Guinevere and for which they were killed when discovered by Francesca's husband. Dante's image of the whirlwind powerfully portrays the couple's loss of objectivity in erotic projection" (Taylor and Finley 29).

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